

Lessons in Grace and Decorum by **GallaPlacidia**

Category: Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling

Genre: Angst with a Happy Ending, Forced Bonding, Grief/Mourning, Harry Potter Epilogue What Epilogue | EWE, Hogwarts Eighth Year, Hurt/Comfort, M/M, Mutual Pining, Psychological Manipulation, Really quite a lot of angst, Unresolved Sexual Tension, but also quite a lot of comfort, veers near non-con for second (not with drarry), violent bullying

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Summary:

In Azkaban, Narcissa Malfoy gives Draco lessons in how to manipulate people into loving him. When Draco is released on the condition that he is bonded to Harry as his prisoner, he finally has a chance to put his newfound skills into practice.

Forced bonding, eighth year (eventually), a Draco driven slightly mad by grief, a furious, self-destructive Harry, a whole lot of angst and a proportionate amount of comfort.

Inspired by an excellent story called Unexpected Consequences by Lauren3210.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [\[授翻\] 优雅与礼仪课 Lessons in Grace and Decorum](#) by [xiyexiye](#)
- Inspired by [Unexpected Consequences](#) by [lauren3210](#).

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“I wish you had been a girl,” said Narcissa Malfoy.

Draco laughed. It was so cold in Azkaban. The number of dementors had been greatly reduced, but there were enough of them for Draco’s head to feel cloudy and light, as if he hadn’t slept in days. Perhaps he hadn’t.

“That’s a new one,” he said. “Why?”

“We raised you to command respect. If you had been a girl, we would have raised you to be loved,” said his mother.

They were the only prisoners sharing a cell, to Draco’s knowledge. He didn’t know who he had to thank for that mercy, but he knew it was the only thing keeping him sane. His mother sat across the cell from him, her hair mysteriously shiny and clean, despite how irregularly they were allowed to shower. She managed to keep her dignity, even here.

“But you do love me,” he said.

“Of course! My sweet boy, of course. But you were not trained to make people love you. And you will need that, now.”

“Will I,” said Draco flatly.

“It’s late,” said his mother. “But you must be taught. It’s the only way.”

“Teach me what? How to be a girl?”

“How to make people love you.”

“You can’t be serious.”

His mother’s voice was urgent.

“You’re going to get out of here, Draco, and it’s going to be so hard. No one will respect you. They will pity you, if you’re lucky. But pity can easily be translated into love, and eventually that will lead to respect. You have to make them love you.”

“Who?”

“Everyone!”

Draco sighed.

“Well, I suppose it will pass the time. Go on then. What’s my first lesson?”

Blind drunk, Harry stumbled through the front door. Ron had to unlock it for him.

“Steady on, mate,” said Ron.

Harry ignored him and went to the liquor cabinet.

“Firewhisky?” he asked.

“No thanks, I’m about to puke. And so are you. Go to bed.”

“Fuck! Fucking *fuck!*” said Harry. There was no firewhisky left.
“Kreacher!”

Kreacher appeared with a pop. Ron looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“Where the *fuck* is the *fuckin*g firewhisky, Kreacher? Did you drink it? Where is it?”

“Master is drunk again,” said Kreacher.

“Harry, come on, go to bed.”

“Oh, fuck off back to Hermione.”

“You know what? I will,” said Ron, going to the chimney. His face matched his hair for colour. “This Angry Fifth Year Harry act is getting pretty old, actually.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, is my trauma inconveniencing you?”

“We all have trauma, Harry, but we’re not all being dicks about it.”

“I’m not being a dick!”

“You absolutely are, mate. Look, I get it, the trials are hard, but if you would just *talk* to us about it—”

“There’s nothing to talk about!” shouted Harry.

Ron looked tired.

“Right. Well. Put him to bed, would you, Kreacher?”

“Master is not obeying Kreacher, Mr. Weasley. Kreacher is obeying Master.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “That’s right. And right now, I order you go find more firewhisky. There must be somewhere that’s still open.”

“Goodnight, Harry,” said Ron, disappearing into the chimney. The green burst of the floo made Harry wince. He didn’t like people using floo powder around him anymore. It was too vivid. Everything was a bit too vivid, since May. Oversaturated. That was why drinking helped; it calmed the colours down.

Kreacher found him another bottle of alcohol, and eventually, Harry passed out at the kitchen table.

“Everyone wants to talk about something. You just need to find out what it is, and ask them about it,” said Narcissa Malfoy. “That’s the key to being a good conversationalist. Asking the right questions.”

“What if they’re tedious to the core?”

“No one is, Draco.”

They practiced. Narcissa played a shy, monosyllabic dinner guest. Draco asked her probing questions in an attempt to engage her. After half an hour, he was furious.

“Anyone so difficult to talk to deserves to be hexed,” he said.

“My sweet, you must be patient. Patience will make you lovable. Try again.”

It took several times, but finally he cracked her. She had picked a subject beforehand without telling him, and when Draco stumbled upon it (eighth century dream magic) she began talking enthusiastically. It felt to Draco like eating shellfish: one had to break through the clunking armour to access the meat.

“That was good,” she said. “Now I will teach you magic words: ‘What do you mean?’”

“What do you mean?” asked Draco. His mother nodded. “No,” said Draco. “What do you *mean*? How are those magic words?”

“Everyone wants to be understood, Draco. When you ask someone what they mean, particularly after they’ve already been talking at length, they feel as if they matter. People love to matter. They love those who make them feel that way.”

Draco closed his eyes and stretched out his legs. They ached from being curled into his chest all day — or was it all night? It was so dark in Azkaban. So dark, and so cold. His spine shivered painfully, and he drew his legs back for warmth, although it hurt him.

Where had this belief been during the war, he wondered? *Everyone wants to be understood.* Had his parents tried to understand muggleborns? Blood traitors?

He did not say anything. To ask his mother how she could have two such conflicting views would be to criticise her, and he couldn't do that. It was funny: as a teenager (and he was still a teenager, he reminded himself) he had never tried to spare his parents' feelings. He told them he hated them, when they wouldn't buy him what he wanted. He hurled abuse at them constantly. But now that they were all three in prison, the idea of adding to their guilt in any way made his stomach roil.

"Do you feel remorse, Draco?" asked his mother one day. He knew it was daytime, because they had just had a meal. Bread. Draco was so hungry sometimes it felt as if his insides were eating themselves.

"I'm too angry to feel remorse," he said.

"You must repent," she said. "No one will love you out there, if you don't."

"Do you feel remorse?" he asked her.

"I'm sorry, Draco. I wish you could forgive me."

She looked so unhappy.

"I told you already," said Draco. "There's nothing to forgive."

She had often told him how sorry she was, but it seemed to Draco that she was only sorry for how her actions had impacted him, not for their innate immorality. Not that he thought much about morality. It was as he said: he was too angry. When he thought of the war, he felt a surge of fury that

blinded him so that he couldn't make out any distinct feeling beyond *unfair, unfair, unfair*. He didn't let himself think about it. That way lay madness.

The lessons passed the time.

"Self-pity is abhorrent," said his mother. "There is nothing less likely to gain you sympathy than seeking it out. You must bear pain bravely and without complaint."

"I've never been brave," said Draco.

"You must be, now, or no one will love you."

"You love me," he said, because her words disturbed him.

"Yes, yes, I love you so much. I want you to be safe. I want you to be happy. It will be so hard for you, out there."

Sometimes, Draco didn't want to leave Azkaban. It was dark, and cold, and he was hungry, but his mother was there. Perhaps they would both get out. Somehow, he knew they wouldn't. His mother seemed to know this too. When she spoke of Draco leaving, it was always with the understanding that he would go alone.

"Do not speak of yourself. Only ask questions," said his mother.

"Why?"

"It affects the balance of power. At first, people will think you are fascinated by them. This will eventually lead to them being fascinated by you. When you know everything about them, and they know nothing about you, you hold the cards, and they will love you for it."

It wasn't *goodness* she was teaching him. It was some kind of Slytherin code of conduct. It was a way of stealing power through emotions. All the things he took pride in had been stripped from him, and she offered him another form of strength.

"Do you feel remorse?" she asked him, often.

“No,” he said. He was too angry, and he could not look at the anger, so he could not feel remorse.

It was cloudy in his head, in any case, because of the dementors. His mother sat apart from him, except when he was asleep. He awoke from his nightmares with the ghost of her touch on his scalp.

“You must repent,” she told him. “You must accept responsibility for the harm you did.”

“The harm *we* did,” corrected Draco.

“Yes,” she said faintly, and he was immediately struck by awful, heart-rending guilt.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“No one will love you. You have to. You have to repent.”

“I can’t,” he said.

“Well, to the next lesson. Compliments.”

She trained him for hours at a time. She filled him with theories about people, about what they wanted, about how to make them love him. She was so frightened no one would love him again. Draco understood that her fear was grounded in guilt, but he wished she wouldn’t say it so often.

The day before his trial, she said it so much that Draco wanted to shake her. He was quiet, although he tried to comfort her.

“No matter what, Draco, you must get out of this place. Take any option, other than here. You will go mad if you stay.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” he said.

“You will break my heart if you don’t go,” she said simply.

“I’ll come and visit.”

“That’s good of you. It will be so hard for you, out there.”

Draco knocked his head against the wall, gently, so that she wouldn’t hear.

When the guard came to fetch him, she was frantic.

“Remember—you must brave—humble—not cowed, but not arrogant—brave—stoic—remember—no one will love you if—be brave—”

“I know,” said Draco.

They did not hug. He nodded at her, and followed the guard to the portkey.

Harry had been dreading Malfoy’s trial more than any of the others. It was the only one so far where he was testifying for the defence. Privately, Harry felt that Malfoy shouldn’t have gone to trial at all. Shouldn’t Harry’s opinion be enough? He had saved the entire Wizarding world. Couldn’t they trust his judgment on one miserable eighteen-year-old git? Malfoy had already lost enough.

He spoke his piece, explaining how Malfoy had arguably saved his life at the Manor, how he had tried to stop Crabbe and Goyle from killing him, how he had lowered his wand instead of harming Dumbledore. Malfoy looked utterly bedraggled, but he sat tall, with his eyes lowered. He had only been in Azkaban for three months, but he was wasting away. Grief had evidently struck him hard. He did not meet Harry’s gaze, even though Harry tried to make him look.

Harry, it had to be said, was still rather drunk from the night before. He had gone to a muggle club and slept with two different men in a row. The first one was shite so he had to go back for seconds. The second one wasn’t much better, but by the time they were done Harry was so dizzy he couldn’t stand up and he called it a night.

The prosecutor was the kind of person Harry loathed the most. He hadn't been involved in the war, but he accused Malfoy with a smug self-righteousness that made Harry seethe. Not that Harry didn't also think Malfoy was a bigoted little shit. It was just that Harry felt as if his word should hold more weight than the self-satisfied prick of a lawyer who drew terse, monosyllabic replies from Malfoy with such crowing delight.

"Are you okay?" whispered Hermione.

"Fine."

The judge cleared his throat. It was time to hear Malfoy's sentence. Harry hated this moment. He always looked at the accused and remembered how it had felt to sit in that chair, in fifth year.

Malfoy was very still, as if he was unbothered by the chains that wrapped around him. His face was impassive.

"This court hereby sentences Draco Lucius Malfoy to five years in Azkaban under dementor custody—"

"No!"

Harry was not aware he had shouted until after it happened.

"Harry! Sit down!" said Hermione.

"No," said Harry. "This is ridiculous. I've testified in favour of *one* person, in all these trials. *One* person who I think might be redeemable, and you lot won't even bloody listen?"

"Mr. Potter, without your testimony, the sentence would undoubtedly have been ten to fifteen—"

"I don't care! It's not about him! It's about me!"

God, he really was quite drunk. Had he just said that? But he went on, ignoring Ron's glowering look. Hermione had her head in her hands. Malfoy, infuriatingly, looked completely undisturbed.

“I *died* for you! For all of you! And you have the *gall* not to trust my judgment...!”

“Harry,” breathed Hermione. “The Wizengamot can’t cater to your whims!”

“Look at him!” shouted Harry, pointing at Malfoy, who finally reacted. He raised his eyebrows. “He looks like shit! He’s not going to last five years in there. He’s already half-dead after three months. Time served, let him go.”

“The court declares a brief recess,” said the judge. The murmuring that had begun at Harry’s outburst grew into a loud babble of excitement and outrage.

“You’ve gone mad,” said Ron. “You just had a mental breakdown about *Malfoy* going to Azkaban. You love sending Malfoys to Azkaban.”

“It’s not about Malfoy,” said Harry. “It’s about—it’s about people getting what they deserve.”

“He was a Death Eater, Harry,” said Hermione. “Don’t you think he deserves to be punished?”

“It’s not about what *he* deserves. It’s about what *I* deserve. *I* deserve to be listened to!”

“Stop shouting.”

“I’m not shouting!”

The judge reappeared, and the court settled.

“In view of the *unusual* circumstances of the key witness in this case,” he said, “we would like to offer an alternative judgment. Mr. Malfoy may either serve five years in Azkaban, or...” He paused to smirk at Harry. “... he may submit to a prisoner’s bond with Harry Potter for a one year period.”

Everyone started talking at once.

“Harry, you can’t, it’s too much responsibility— it’s the last thing you need right now,” said Hermione urgently.

“Mate, no way, it’s *Malfoy*, you don’t want that git in your house.”

“Order! Order! Mr. Potter, a prisoner’s bond would ensure that Mr. Malfoy would have to obey any instructions you gave him. He would also not be able to stray further from you than fifteen metres without your express permission. He would be banned from performing magic. You would, in essence, become his jailer.”

Harry stared at Malfoy. The only sign that he had even heard was that he was clenching his jaw.

“You’re just doing this to humiliate me,” Harry told the judge. Hermione made a small moan. He ignored her.

“Mr. Malfoy is a danger to society,” said the judge. “We believe you would be able to neutralise that risk, but if you are unwilling, we are, of course, happy to send him to Azkaban, as per our original ruling.”

“No,” said Harry firmly. “I’ll do it.”

“Harry!”

Malfoy raised his eyebrows again.

“Mr. Malfoy, do you consent?”

“Yes,” said Malfoy, without hesitation.

“Harry, you *can’t*,” said Hermione.

“Honestly, Hermione? Fuck it.”

He clambered over the stalls to get to where the judge stood by Malfoy’s chair.

“Hold out your arm,” said the judge. The chains around Malfoy’s chest loosened.

Malfoy held out his right arm.

“Your *other* arm, Mr. Malfoy.”

Malfoy flushed and held out his left arm. In the grey rags he wore, his forearm was exposed, the Dark Mark hideous and bruised-looking.

“Mr. Potter, if you would place your hand on his Mark?”

Harry quailed. It was one thing to agree to have complete power over Malfoy, another thing entirely *to touch his Dark Mark*. It was revolting. It made him sweat just looking at it.

Malfoy lowered his arm.

“Never mind, Potter,” he said. “Thanks all the same.”

Harry grabbed him and put his hand over the mark. He had expected it to feel different, but it was just skin—slightly cold skin. It was also the most contact he’d ever had with Malfoy without one of them trying to kill each other.

“You both understand that this is a magically binding contract?”

“Yes,” they said. Malfoy was avoiding his eye again.

“In that case.... *Captivus carcerem!*”

The mark warmed under Harry’s hand. Malfoy twitched, but said nothing.

“Well, let’s see if that worked. Mr. Potter, would you give a command?”

“Look at me,” said Harry. Malfoy turned his grey eyes to him. They were steady and emotionless.

Harry was disheartened to notice that Azkaban hadn't really made him any less good looking.

"Perhaps something he would be unwilling to do, to test," said the judge.

Malfoy frowned a little.

"Um..." said Harry. "Jump up and down?"

Malfoy was still chained to the chair. He tried to get up, could not, and began to writhe, gasping, in what was clearly agony.

"Stop! Stay seated!" said Harry quickly. Malfoy drooped, his dirty hair falling into his face. "What the hell was that?"

"The bond uses the cruciatus curse as a fail-safe. It's to prevent disobedience."

"That's fucked up!"

The judge sniffed a little.

"Well, the spell seems to have worked. I will send over an informational pamphlet that ought to answer any questions you might have. You are both free to go."

He touched the chains that still confined Malfoy and they fell to the ground with a clamour.

"Wait," said Malfoy. "I thought I would return to Azkaban to await release. I have to say goodbye to my mother."

An icy chill spread through Harry.

"Mr. Malfoy, your mother is dead," said the judge. "She was killed when they apprehended your father."

"No," said Malfoy, confidently. "She was in my cell with me."

“Your father was killed as well,” said the judge, with what Harry thought was a little too much enthusiasm for the truth. “They are both dead. You were *there*.”

“No,” said Malfoy, but he sounded less confident now. “No, because... because I *saw* her. Today, I saw her—” Suddenly his eyes went round. “Oh,” he said, softly.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Harry, because it looked like Malfoy might cry, and there were photographers hovering.

It was as if Malfoy tidied up his emotions. They disappeared neatly from his face, and he *smiled*.

“Lead the way,” he said.

“Side along all right?”

“Yes.”

Harry put his hand on Malfoy’s elbow, and twisted them to Grimmauld Place.

2. Chapter 2

Dead, they are both dead, thought Draco. He found that he *could* remember. He had dreamt about them being killed by aurors, often— it had always been a comfort to wake and find his mother, sitting beside him. His dreams must have been real.

Self-pity is abhorrent, his mother had told him. *Don't speak about yourself*.

Of course, it hadn't been his mother, really. Or had it? Was it magic, or madness? Was she some kind of ghost? She had seemed so real...

He was in a neat little kitchen. Potter looked slightly tipsy. His hair was more than usually ridiculous. He let go of Draco's arm and Draco felt suddenly cold. *You must make them love you*. It didn't matter whether those lessons in Azkaban had been real or not. They were what his mother would have said, he knew they were. He had to make Potter love him— not fall *in* love, of course. He knew perfectly well that nothing he could do would make *that* happen. He had spent all fifth year thinking about it, and then Potter had put his father in prison and almost killed him in a bathroom. In any case, his mother had warned him about romance, had told him it would be a long time before he could trust anyone with such an unpredictable, explosive form of caring.

But he had to make Potter love him. Trust him. It was the only way Draco would ever regain any of the things he had lost— and he had lost so much... His heart constricted; he forced himself to breathe.

Potter had called him *redeemable*.

He remembered every one of his mother's lessons, and he wouldn't let her down.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Am *I* all right?" repeated Potter.

“Yes. This can’t have been your desired outcome. Defeat Dark Lord, Save Wizarding World, Acquire Hated Nemesis As Slave.”

“You’re not my slave,” said Potter, uncomfortably.

“It just seems like hard luck, that’s all.”

Potter frowned at him.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked, suspiciously. “What did they do to you in Azkaban?”

Draco shrugged. *Don’t speak of yourself.*

“Are you all right?” he asked again.

“I’m fine. This is fucking weird.”

Draco laughed. It seemed to make Harry relax a bit. *Laughing sets him at ease*, noted Draco. This was good; he was following the plan, his mother’s plan, and there was no need to think properly.

“Look,” said Harry. “Just because I didn’t want you to go to Azkaban doesn’t mean I want to spend time with you.”

Draco flattened his expression and thought furiously. Potter had saved him. Again. That was what Potter did; he saved people. Was it because he liked being a saviour? If so, Draco would give him opportunities to make him feel magnanimous and good.

“Well, I have to do whatever you tell me,” he said, holding out his hands. “What would you like me to do?”

It was funny to think that fifteen-year-old Draco had fantasised about a situation not unlike this one. In fifth year, when his crush on Potter had spun nearly out of control, he had been disgusted with himself. It was necessary, therefore, to conjure up situations in which Potter *forced* him to have sex with him.

They were stupid fantasies. Potter would never force anyone, let alone Draco. But there was a bitter kind of irony to it all.

“What?” asked Potter, looking confused.

“Shall I get down on my knees?” Draco spoke in a low voice, almost too embarrassed to say the words, even though he knew Potter wasn’t going to take him up on it. “Is... is that what you want me for?”

“Oh my GOD, Malfoy, *no!*”

Potter looked predictably horrified. Draco was still reeling from remembering his parents’ death, but his heart found a little corner to ache with. He ignored it. He had a plan to carry through.

“You mean didn’t do all that just so I would suck you off whenever you wanted? Or, I don’t know, to humiliate and degrade me?”

“Malfoy...” said Potter, and Malfoy wondered if he had misjudged. Potter looked utterly miserable. “No.”

“Oh,” said Draco. He had known that was what Potter would say, but he had thought it would make Potter feel virtuous to have to say it.

There was a pop and an old house elf appeared. Draco recognised him immediately, and it was all he could do not to burst into tears. *Kreacher*. Kreacher had known him since he was a baby. Kreacher understood who he was, where he came from, what had been lost. Draco sank to one knee before him.

“Master Draco,” said Kreacher. It had been such a long time since anyone spoke to him with respect.

“Kreacher,” said Draco, trying to keep his voice steady. “You look well.”

“You know each other,” said Harry. He seemed annoyed.

“Kreacher was sorry to hear about Miss Cissy.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Draco.

“Kreacher, can you make up a room for Malfoy? He’s staying here.”

Kreacher cast Draco a long, sympathetic look and disappeared.

“I’m sorry about your mum,” said Potter. Draco was seized by violent memories of all the times he had taunted Potter for being an orphan. He turned away.

“Thank you.”

“Did you... did you not know?” asked Potter.

“I’ll try to stay out of your way,” said Draco. “I don’t suppose you have any clothes I could borrow?”

“Er, yeah, probably.” His voice hardened. “Only you can’t be a stuck-up prick about them.”

Draco felt the command grip him. It was a tricky one, because what constituted prickishness was subjective.

“Anything will be better than these,” he said, gesturing at the thin grey scraps he wore. He didn’t dare say anything else, in case it counted as stuck-up. He had managed to be quiet when the cruciatus curse hit him because he couldn’t jump when Potter told him to, but he wasn’t sure he could do it again. He worried he might just break down into heaving sobs on the kitchen tiles, and that would most certainly be both cowardly and self-pitying.

It would also be understandable, said a voice inside his head. But he knew what his mother would say, so that voice was irrelevant.

Every time he thought Malfoy living with him couldn’t be weirder, he was wrong. He told Malfoy he could go anywhere in the house, and gave him

some clothes. He picked a pair of muggle joggers and a red jumper, because he still hated the git.

“Don’t fucking complain about them,” he warned, when he gave them to Malfoy. Malfoy said nothing; he just disappeared into the shower.

Harry was not prepared for what the sight of Malfoy in his clothes would do to him. It was bizarrely intimate, as if Malfoy was his boyfriend and had dressed himself in Harry’s wardrobe after a long night of hard fucking. The shower seemed to have revitalised him. He didn’t say anything about the clothes, except to ask if Harry would lend him some socks.

“What are you doing about money?” asked Harry, throwing him a pair. Malfoy caught them gracefully, one-handed.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“I’m not paying for you all year.”

Malfoy didn’t seem to know what to say.

“I imagine there’s a stipend,” he said eventually.

“Aren’t you rich?”

“I don’t know,” said Malfoy, carefully, which Harry took to mean that Malfoy hadn’t been told yet if his assets would be returned to him. He didn’t look upset about it, only rather vague and distracted.

“I’ll write to the ministry,” said Harry. Malfoy nodded and slipped out of the room.

He didn’t come downstairs for dinner.

“Master Malfoy is asleep,” said Kreacher, when Harry told him to fetch him. Remembering the bags under Malfoy’s eyes, Harry thought it was probably better to leave him.

Harry couldn’t help but wonder if he was up to something. It was habit.

Much, much later, Harry lay awake in bed. He had only had a few glasses of firewhisky that evening. Usually he went out every night, to muggle clubs and bars, occasionally accompanied by Ron and Hermione, although they never wanted to stay out as late as he did. But he didn't fancy leaving Malfoy alone in his house. He'd probably find a way to smuggle Death Eaters in through a Vanishing Cabinet.

So Harry was tossing and turning, unable to sleep, when he heard a sound on the landing.

He froze. It was Malfoy. He could hear him stepping on the creaking third stair, but no further. He must have sat down on the steps. And then he spoke, in a low voice, but the walls of Grimmauld Place were thin.

"Are you real?"

There was a pause, and then Malfoy laughed softly.

"Fair enough."

Pause.

"I know, mother."

Harry's heart twisted with reluctant sympathy that was chased immediately by suspicion. Maybe Malfoy was doing this so Harry would pity him.

"I'm trying. It's not... I thought it would be easier," said Malfoy.

Harry didn't think Malfoy would be eager to sound so hesitant and frightened if he knew Harry was listening.

"Let's go downstairs," said Malfoy, and Harry heard the creak on the stair again. He turned on his bedroom light and started reading *Hogwarts: A History*. Hermione had pointedly given it to him for his birthday.

Half an hour later, there was a knock.

"Yes?"

Malfoy pushed the door open with his hip. He carried two steaming mugs.

“Tea?”

Harry glared at him.

“Valerian root,” said Malfoy. “My mother makes it for me when I can’t sleep.”

Harry noted the creepy use of the present tense. When he didn’t answer, Malfoy approached his bedside table.

“Do you have a coaster?”

“I don’t use coasters.”

“Barbarian. Pass me that book.”

Harry put *Hogwarts: A History* down and Malfoy placed one of the mugs on it. He then retreated to lean elegantly against the doorway. Harry felt more aware than ever of how lithe he was, wearing Harry’s clothes, hovering in Harry’s bedroom.

“It’s not laced with anything,” said Draco.

“Of course it isn’t. You’ll go back to Azkaban if anything happens to me.”

Malfoy wrapped his long fingers around his mug.

“Can’t you sleep?” he asked.

“No,” said Harry bitterly.

“Do you often have trouble?”

What on earth was Draco Malfoy *doing*, bringing him tea in the middle of the night, anyway? For some reason, Harry kept thinking of the way Malfoy had laughed when Cedric Diggory died. How *dare* he try to make nice with Harry, now. How *dare* he.

“Cedric Diggory didn’t deserve to die,” he said fiercely. Malfoy blinked at him. He seemed to be thinking what to say. Harry thought if Malfoy tried to apologise, he might punch him.

But he didn’t.

“What was he like?” he asked.

“What?”

“I didn’t know him. What was he like?”

“I...” Harry was stumped. He couldn’t imagine why Malfoy was asking him. Was it guilt? Prurient curiosity? But something in him compelled him to answer. Cedric deserved to be talked about. “He was good looking.”

Malfoy laughed wryly.

“Yes, I remember *that*.”

Did he? Harry didn’t remember noticing how handsome Cedric was, except in a competitive sense. He hadn’t been awake enough to himself back then to understand why he found Cedric so frustrating. Or Malfoy, for that matter.

But he understood, now. He knew that part of the anger he felt when he looked at Malfoy was because he wanted to touch him so badly, but couldn’t.

Although you could, said a horrible voice in Harry’s head. *He would let you do anything you wanted to him. He would have to.*

Harry refocused on the subject at hand, and not on Malfoy’s chin-length hair, which was loose around his face and had dried slightly wavy. Cedric. Cedric Diggory.

“At the time I was annoyed that he didn’t, sort of... stand up for me. About the *badges*,” said Harry, glaring at Malfoy, who had the grace to look embarrassed. “But looking back, I respect that he was never rude to me. It

must have been hard for him. I mean, he wasn't even mentioned in the Champion's article."

"Hufflepuff," said Malfoy.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?!"

"Modest," said Malfoy.

"Oh," said Harry.

"You two must have had a weird relationship," said Malfoy.

"Yeah," said Harry. He leant back into his pillows. He hadn't talked about Cedric in a long time. There had been so many fresher, closer tragedies to process. But it felt good to talk about him. Like exploring a wound in his mouth with his tongue. "He wanted me to take the cup by myself. Said I'd won it. I insisted we take it together."

"Good sportsmanship," said Malfoy.

"Yeah, well, it fucking got him killed, didn't it."

"That didn't kill him. The Dark Lord did."

"*Don't call him that,*" spat Harry. Malfoy straightened against the door frame.

"You would prefer I called him..."

"Voldemort!"

Malfoy shuddered so violently that he spilt hot tea all over his hands, and gave a little cry of pain. He dried himself on his jumper.

"I can't," he said.

"Coward," said Harry. Malfoy's face tightened, and Harry waited for him to argue, to fight back.

He didn't.

"The point stands," he said. "It was a nice gesture. It's not your fault what happened, afterwards."

"Your father was there."

Malfoy looked down, his hair forming a curtain that blocked him from view.

"You must hate him," said Malfoy, after a while.

"Not much point in hating the dead," said Harry.

Another long pause. Why didn't he leave? It was obvious he wanted to. Obvious Harry's words had upset him. But he stayed.

"Who's left to hate, if not the dead?" said Malfoy finally.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Malfoy looked up.

"Are you seriously trying make me feel less guilty about Cedric Diggory?" Harry went on. "Do you know how fucking insane that is?"

"You're angry," said Malfoy.

"Of course I'm fucking angry!"

"Who are you angry at? Apart from me."

"Get the fuck out of my room!"

Malfoy was gone in an instant. Harry stared after him, half-expecting him to return. It took him a while to remember that Malfoy couldn't come back, not without disobeying him.

The tea was delicious. Harry tried to stay angry as he sipped it, but found that he couldn't. Something inside him had loosened, when Malfoy told him it wasn't his fault. Of course he knew it wasn't his fault. But knowing was different from believing. And Malfoy, more than anyone, was unlikely to sugarcoat things to make Harry feel better. Malfoy had never hesitated to paint Harry in the worst possible light. If even *he* didn't blame him...

Harry fell asleep more easily than he had in ages.

3. Chapter 3

“Potter doesn’t *want* me to be nice to him,” Draco told his mother. Potter was prowling around downstairs, and Draco hadn’t emerged yet that morning. When he woke up, his mother was sitting calmly at the edge of the bed.

“He doesn’t trust you.”

“This is stupid.”

“No, Draco. It’s just hard.”

“You’re *dead*.”

“Do you feel remorse?”

“No!”

“Not for any of it? What about the people you tortured?”

Draco put his head into his hands.

“I can’t!”

“What about your friends, who joined He Who Must Not Be Named because of you? What about Crabbe?”

He wanted to shout at her. She had done things too. Nothing as bad as him, because she was a woman—He Who Must Not Be Named had been rather sexist. Female Death Eaters were few and far between, and they had to be more than usually violent to make any progress in the ranks. His mother had never even taken the Mark.

But she had let Draco take it. And as for his father—

But she knew all that. He knew how guilty she felt. He couldn’t say that to her. Instead he just breathed through his nose and tried not to think about

Vincent.

Fearing other people's hatred wasn't a good reason to repent, anyway. That was just repenting being caught, not feeling true remorse. It wasn't possible to feel true remorse, now that they had lost the war. It was too convenient a time to have a change of heart. How could he ever trust that it was real?

And yet, Potter had called him *redeemable*. Like a coupon.

Or something half-destroyed that was still worth rescuing from a fire.

"No one will love you if you don't repent," said his mother. Draco wondered if he hated her.

"I know, mother," he said.

"I love you."

"I know you do."

"Be patient with Potter. He is suffering. He needs someone to talk to."

"He doesn't want to talk to me."

"The person is irrelevant. He needs a pair of ears, and will be grateful to whomever provides them."

Draco's door burst open and Potter poked his head through. Draco noticed unhappily that Potter clearly couldn't see his mother. He knew she was dead, but this fresh evidence hit him harder than expected. He carefully straightened his face.

"I'm going out," said Potter. "Don't leave the house."

He shut the door and clattered down the stairs.

Fear gripped Draco. He chased after Potter, terrified that he would be too late.

“Potter! Potter, wait, wait!”

Potter had his hand on the front door.

“You can’t come with me,” he said, sounding annoyed.

“I don’t— that’s not—what if there’s a fire?” garbled Malfoy, his heart beating in his ears.

“Are you threatening me?” growled Potter.

“What? No. Can I leave if there’s a fire?”

Potter’s expression changed completely. He looked young and friendly and rather lost.

“Oh, shit, sorry. Yeah. Uh, if your life is in danger you can do anything you need to save yourself.”

Draco sank down to sit on the steps and leant his forehead on the bannisters.

“Thank you.”

Potter hovered for a moment by the door.

“Um, I’m going to Diagon Alley,” he said awkwardly. “Do you need anything?”

“Better wait until we find out about my money situation, I think.”

“Right,” said Potter. “But I could spot you until then, if there’s anything you want?”

Don’t ask for things, his mother had told him. But accept gifts when they are offered. It makes people feel that they judged correctly.

“Boethius’ *Consolations of Magical Philosophy*,” said Draco. “It’ll be in Flourish and Blotts.”

“It’s not a spell book, is it?”

Draco resisted rolling his eyes.

“It’s philosophy, Potter. And consolation. Boethius wrote it in prison. Forget it, it’s stupid.”

“No, I’ll buy it.”

“I’ll pay you back.”

“No rush,” said Potter, and left.

“I’m so glad you’re reading this, Harry!” said Hermione, as he waited in the check out. “I was wondering when you’d get around to my suggestion list.”

“It’s for Malfoy, actually.”

Ron groaned.

“You’re buying him gifts?”

“It’s not a gift,” said Harry defensively. “He’s paying me back. I asked him if he needed anything.”

“And he picked this?” asked Hermione. “Not...clothes? Or hair products?”

“Look, he’s been really fucking weird ever since he came back with me, all right? I don’t pretend to understand what’s going in his head. What’s this book even about, anyway?”

“Well... it’s sort of appropriate, really. Boethius was a sixth century wizard who was imprisoned for treason. He wrote *The Consolations of Magical Philosophy* in prison. It’s a conversation between him and Lady Philosophy,

who we think may have been the ghost of a woman he loved, possibly his wife or mother. She advises him on how to go on when all has been lost.”

Harry thought of Malfoy’s voice on the stairs, “*Are you real?*”

“What happened to Boethius?” he asked.

“Oh, he was executed. Still, I can see why it might offer Malfoy some comfort. Although I am surprised; Boethius was famously muggle-born.”

“Has he apologised for being a slimy Death Eater git yet?” asked Ron.

“No. I wouldn’t believe him if he did, to be honest.”

“I think you’re doing a very noble thing, Harry,” said Hermione. “Crazy, but noble.”

“Thanks. In fairness, Malfoy’s off his nut as well. I think he still thinks his mum is alive. He keeps talking to her.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, looking desperately sad.

“There’s not... another way she could have come back, is there?” he asked, casually. “Beyond being a ghost?”

“No, Harry,” said Hermione, looking even sadder. “If Malfoy’s talking to her, he’s just talking to himself.”

“Right,” said Harry. “Yeah, I figured.”

“Thanks,” said Malfoy, when Harry gave him the book. He took it away upstairs and didn’t come down for dinner. Harry hadn’t seen him eat yet. He hoped Kreacher was feeding him.

It didn't get any more normal having Malfoy in the house. It didn't help that Malfoy kept *talking* to him. He would sit near Harry, looking disgustingly fit, and ask him what he was up to, how he slept, how he was feeling, whether he had plans. Harry answered in suspicious, short sentences, but that didn't seem to deter Malfoy in the least.

When Harry asked him questions back, however, Malfoy quickly deflected.

"Aren't you sick of that book?" asked Malfoy, one afternoon. Harry was reading *Quidditch Through the Ages* for the fifth time that week.

"I like it," said Harry, frowning.

"Merlin, we all *like* it. But there are other quidditch books, you know."

Harry was shocked out of surliness.

"There are?"

"Of course! Whole novels. Haven't you ever read *A Clutch of Snitches*?"

"A what?"

"Potter! My God! What a journey you're about to go on!"

"What are you talking about?"

Malfoy leant forward. His eyes shone with excitement. Harry hadn't ever seen him look like that, elated, with no malice. It made Malfoy look vulnerable, although he could tell Malfoy didn't realise that.

"Only the best mystery series that's ever been written," said Malfoy. "Thrilling adventure. Daring misdeeds. Reluctant heroes— you'll like that, I imagine. All set in the world of the International Quidditch League. You *have* to read one! I think the latest came out in June."

Harry stared at Malfoy, trying to figure out if there was anything to hate about what he was saying. There wasn't, he concluded. Not really.

“All right, I’ll read it,” he said.

“You should get the whole series. Once you read one, you won’t be able to stop.”

It turned out that Malfoy was quite right. Harry tore through *Finders Seekers* in half a day. It ended on a cliff hanger. He shut the book with gusto and Malfoy glanced up. They were both in the living room. Malfoy seemed to do nothing all day but pour over *The Consolations of Magical Philosophy*, although he often disappeared into his room for hours at a time. Harry knew he still talked to his mother up there. It was depressing.

“Finished?” asked Malfoy.

“So the referee just *gets away*?”

Malfoy grinned.

“Read the next one.”

“Do you think Flourish and Blotts will still be open?”

Malfoy glanced at the clock. He didn’t have a watch. Harry guiltily noticed that he was still wearing the joggers and red jumper Harry had given him on his first day—Harry hadn’t thought to give him anything new. Why hadn’t Malfoy said anything? Then Harry remembered—he had told Malfoy not to complain, hadn’t he?

“Should be, if you hurry,” said Malfoy.

“D’you want to come?”

“With you? Outside?”

“Yeah, help me pick up the next books in the series.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe we can get you some robes, while we’re at it.”

Malfoy looked uncomfortable.

“Has the Ministry answered about the stipend...?”

“Yeah,” lied Harry. “I forgot to tell you, you have three galleons a week.” It was almost nothing, but then, Harry wasn’t sure the Ministry would ever get back to him, and he didn’t want to be stuck paying for Malfoy’s extravagances all year.

“Brilliant,” said Malfoy. It sounded rather forced. Harry imagined he probably used to get more than that as pocket money when he was six.

If it was strange having Malfoy in his house, it was even stranger going out in public with him. News of the prisoner’s bond had evidently trickled out, and people openly stared at them. Malfoy ignored everyone, although he kept glancing at Harry in a way that he evidently thought was subtle.

They had almost got into a fist fight the last time they were in Flourish and Blotts together. Harry knew they were both thinking of it, when they stepped inside.

“Is this okay?” asked Malfoy in an undertone.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Look! They have the latest one in the series!”

“Steady on,” said Malfoy. “You have to read the first twelve before you get to that one.”

“There are twelve?”

“Each better than the last. Well, except for book nine. Griselda Crowley had been dosed with Amortentia when she wrote that one, so it’s mainly porn.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” said Harry. Malfoy blushed. There was something very sexy about Malfoy when he blushed, Harry realised with dismay.

While Harry gathered all twelve of the *Clutch of Snitches* books, Malfoy wandered up and down the aisles, coming back with his own stack of books.

“That’ll cost you about 15 galleons, I reckon,” said Harry.

“Really?” Malfoy put the books down and started looking at their prices. He had obviously never had to do that, before. Harry suddenly wished he had said Malfoy’s allowance was slightly more. He’d only be able to afford one book out of his stack, if he wanted to get clothes as well.

Malfoy put the last book down with a slow, deliberate movement.

“What are you getting?” asked Harry.

“I don’t really want anything,” said Malfoy.

“Come on. You can’t keep rereading Boethius.”

Malfoy looked stricken.

“Did you mean to phrase that as an order?”

“No!” said Harry, horrified. “You can read whatever you like! Sorry.”

“Thank you,” said Malfoy.

It was like the incident when Harry had told Malfoy to stay in the house. Mostly Harry forgot about the bond, but Malfoy, clearly, could not.

“I didn’t realise I’d done it,” said Harry. “I’m sorry.”

Malfoy turned his back to Harry as he returned the books in his stack to their shelves.

“How much was the Boethius, anyway?” he asked.

“It was on sale,” lied Harry automatically.

“Liar. You think you’re so sneaky, Potter. Think you’ll do your good deeds without me noticing. But I always notice.”

“It was two galleons,” admitted Harry. “Anyway, you can get these next time, when we come to get our schoolbooks.”

Malfoy froze.

“Schoolbooks?”

“For eighth year? To get our NEWTS?”

“I can’t go back to Hogwarts.”

Harry felt himself bristling. *He* was going back to Hogwarts, wasn’t he, even though it was where so many people he loved had died, where *he* had died, but *Malfoy* couldn’t handle it?

“Well, you’re going to have to,” he said, “because I am, and in case you’ve forgotten, you’re my prisoner.”

Malfoy only looked at him. Harry had just accidentally banned him from reading his favourite book. Of *course* he hadn’t forgotten that he was Harry’s prisoner.

Ron was right, Harry realised. Harry *was* a dick.

“Malfoy,” he began, but Malfoy interrupted him.

“I’m only worried they won’t give me permission to return. I know that would complicate our...my being your prisoner. And it’s already complicated.”

“They’d better let you come back,” said Harry darkly. Malfoy shrugged his narrow shoulders.

“You ought to pay, if we want to get to Malkin’s before it closes,” he said.

4. Chapter 4

In the last few weeks before Hogwarts, Harry realised that Malfoy was a good conversationalist. Then, he realised that he was an *excellent* conversationalist. Beyond anything Harry had ever encountered, really. At first, Harry told himself he was refraining from going out clubbing every night because he needed to make sure Malfoy wasn't up to anything, but within a week he knew that was only part of it. Staying home and talking to Malfoy made parts of Harry's brain engage that he had thought were lost.

For one thing, Harry had never been able to talk to anyone about quidditch the way he could with Malfoy. Talking to him about quidditch was like talking to Hermione about books. Malfoy seemed to know everything there was to know about the subject. He had never missed a World Cup. He had studied playbooks. He knew the names of all the moves, including ones that Harry used to do naturally in school, without knowing they *had* names.

"I still remember the Fairfax Twirl you did in the match against Ravenclaw in third year. That was bloody amazing."

"Could you see through the dementor costume, then?"

"Do you still play?" asked Malfoy, smoothly ignoring Harry's question.

"With Ron, sometimes."

"You know you could go pro."

"Only because it would be good PR for any team that had me."

"Don't be thick. Because you could do the Fairfax Twirl already when you were thirteen."

"I don't even remember this infamous Twirl."

Malfoy described it in detail, telling him the history of the move, using sketches to illustrate it. When Malfoy explained quidditch, it felt like being

taught how to read— meaningless shapes suddenly became patterns that could understood.

They never flew together, though. Ron came to get him for a friendly game with the Weasleys a couple of times a week, and Harry couldn't bring himself to ask if Malfoy could join. It wasn't even because he was a Malfoy: it was because the games felt like part of the Weasley grieving process, and only family belonged. Given the fact that Harry and Ginny hadn't worked out, he felt lucky they still included him in that. Harry thought about trying to explain this to Malfoy, but he suspected Malfoy would close up, the way he always did with anything to do with the past.

Malfoy didn't mention the fact that Harry played quidditch without him. He acted as if flying was the last thing on his mind, whenever Harry left with his broomstick. He had taken to spending time with Kreacher. Harry would return from quidditch with the Weasleys to find Malfoy laughing quietly at Kreacher, helping him clean some part of the house, or, increasingly, baking. Malfoy, it transpired, was very good at baking. It was beyond weird to come home to Grimmauld Place and hear chatter coming from the kitchen, and delicious smells spreading throughout the house.

At first, Harry had been annoyed by Malfoy's relationship with Kreacher. It reminded him of how Kreacher and Narcissa Malfoy had conspired against Sirius in fifth year. But he quickly realised that Malfoy had known Kreacher all his life, and it was obvious that the wizened old elf really loved him. There probably weren't many people left about whom that could be said. Harry stopped feeling irked by how well they got on, and started feeling sad, instead.

Malfoy wasn't just good at talking about quidditch. It was his questions, really, that made him so easy to talk to. Harry realised this after he found that he had just monologued for the better part of an hour about What Hogwarts Meant To Him. He hadn't intended to go into it at all. They had been talking casually about eighth year, and Harry said he was looking forward to it. Malfoy seized upon this.

“What are you looking forward to most?”

That was something else— Malfoy’s questions were often ones that made Harry think positively. He would ask things like “What do you like best about summer?” or “Did you ever have a really great Christmas?”

“I don’t know,” Harry answered now. “It’ll just be nice. It’s always felt a bit like home.”

Malfoy watched him as if he had just said something very interesting.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

And so Harry explained. He had not anticipated that the answer would be so lengthy. But Malfoy didn’t seem to mind— in fact, whenever Harry thought he must surely have bored him to tears, he would ask another question.

Malfoy never seemed to tire of Harry talking. Harry knew Ron and Hermione would be horrified to hear him have these conversations, not with them, but with *Draco Malfoy*, and perhaps they were right. But they had been so close to everything. Draco knew just enough to know what to ask, but not so much that he already knew the answers. It allowed Harry to talk things over with clarity.

But after a while, Harry grew uncomfortable with the fact that he still knew so little about Malfoy. It reminded him a little of Ginny’s experience with Tom Riddle’s diary. Ginny had poured herself into it, and received nothing in return. Harry answered Malfoy’s questions, but Malfoy grew distant when Harry asked him anything back.

They were in the living room. Malfoy was rereading *Finders Seekers*. Harry had just finished the eighth book in the series and didn’t feel like starting the next one yet.

“Malfoy,” he said.

“Mhm,” said Malfoy, not looking up from his book.

“Who was your best friend in Slytherin?”

Malfoy turned his head slowly to look at him.

“My best friend?”

“Yeah. I mean I always it assumed it was sort of Crabbe and Goyle equally. But then you and Pansy Parkinson were friends, too, right? Who were you closest with?”

Malfoy stared at him for a long time before answering.

“It changed,” he said, which wasn’t really an answer at all.

“How did it change?”

Malfoy shrugged.

“Do you miss Crabbe and Goyle?” asked Harry recklessly.

Malfoy seemed to be calculating how best to answer. Apparently, he could not come to a conclusion.

“I left something in the other room,” he said, and left.

Well, it wasn’t surprising that Malfoy didn’t want to talk about anything to do with the war. Especially not with Harry. Harry decided to try something easier.

The next morning, Harry sat on the counter as Malfoy baked. Malfoy’s hands were quick and deft. He managed to make his shabby, second-hand robes look elegant, because he was so graceful.

He handed Harry a wooden spoon coated in thick whipped cream.

Sometimes, Harry caught himself wondering if this was what it would be like to date Draco. Then he reminded himself of the awful things Malfoy had done, and the mirage ended.

“What’s your favourite colour?” asked Harry.

Malfoy’s back was to him, but Harry could still see him tense.

“Are we six, Potter?”

“Is it green?”

“No. What’s your favourite colour?”

“I quite like green, actually.”

“Really? Why green?”

But Harry wasn’t falling for that.

“Come on, I told you mine, what’s yours?”

“My what?”

“Favourite colour.”

“Oh.”

Malfoy handed him the finished pie. It looked amazing.

“Hope you like caramel,” he said. “Can you put it in a stasis and cast a cooling charm? It needs to sit for two hours.”

Harry cast the spells.

“I don’t know why you’re making such a big deal out of your favourite colour, Malfoy,” he said. “Honestly, you act like you’re hiding state secrets. It’s very dramatic.”

“Blue,” said Malfoy quickly. “I’m not trying to be dramatic.”

“What kind of blue?” asked Harry, because he was determined to decode Malfoy even if he had to do it through inane, ice breaker questions.

“Pale. Right, I’d better just...” Malfoy didn’t finish his sentence. He simply fled.

“He’s started to ask me about myself,” said Draco.

“You’re doing so well, my sweet boy,” said his mother.

“I don’t—it’s strange, isn’t it? Never to talk about myself?”

“You talk about yourself all the time, Draco.”

Draco paced around his bedroom.

“Do I?” he asked, vaguely. He knew that used to be true, when he was younger. But then he took the Mark, and his life became so complicated and miserable that talking about it lost its charm.

He should have just answered Potter when he asked him about his favourite bloody colour. He’d made a fool of himself, by hedging like that. Only it was such a harmless inquiry. There was no way the answer could be interesting. (Although it was interesting that Potter had said green. Draco had genuinely wanted to ask more about that.) It had thrown him, that’s all, just as it had thrown him when Potter asked if he missed Crabbe and Goyle. Draco had run through options:

1. Yes, I miss them both - *Impossible, they tried to kill Harry, it would make him hate Draco*
2. No, I don’t miss them - *Impossible, it would make him sound so callous, it would lead to further questions, then it would become apparent Draco had lied*
3. We weren’t so close, in the end - *Impossible, Potter would ask who he had been close with, and Draco would have to explain that there had been no one, that he had felt so alone that sometimes it was hard to breathe, and that would seem like he was trying to garner sympathy*

4. I can't miss them because I'm too angry - *Impossible, Potter would ask what about, and Draco couldn't explain*

5. I don't think about them - *Impossible, callous, cruel...*

"Draco," said his mother. He stopped pacing. "You don't *want* to talk to him, do you?"

"I..."

Sometimes it felt as if Harry sort of... forgot who Draco was. Sometimes Harry acted as if they were friends.

Also, he would be lying if he said that some of his more fifth-yearish feelings towards Potter hadn't reawakened. Potter was stronger and sexier than he had ever been at school, and getting to know him better was only intensifying his attractiveness.

"My sweet," said his mother, tilting her head, her eyes wide with sorrow. "Do you really think he'll like you if he gets to know you better?"

Draco rested his forearms against the wall and buried his head in them. His mother wouldn't say that. She wouldn't. Would she? She just did. Who knew if it was magic or madness. It didn't matter. She was right.

"Do you love me?" he asked her.

"So much," said his mother. "Do you feel remorse yet, Draco?"

"No."

"Not even though you broke his nose? You mocked him for having no parents? You let Death Eaters into the place he thinks of as home?"

His mother let him take the Mark, but he had been awful before that. Was hurting people in his blood? And what was he supposed to do, march up to Harry and say "Listen, my life depends on your good opinion of me. Oh, by the way, all those reasons you hate me? I'm sorry about them, I've changed, honest!"

He hadn't changed, anyway. He would let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts again. He turned to face his mother. Her hair gleamed like polished silver as she watched him. He had to let them into Hogwarts, because unlike Potter, he had *had* a home, and he couldn't let a small thing like morality stand in the way of protecting it.

Harry had let the Battle of Hogwarts happen. Had let people he loved die for him. He had done what Draco could not: sacrificed his home for what was right.

"I can't feel remorse," said Draco.

"No one will love you if you don't," said his mother.

"I know," said Draco.

5. Chapter 5

Draco went downstairs the next morning determined to redeem himself after the embarrassing Favourite Colour fiasco. Harry was sitting at the kitchen table looking distinctly hungover, which made Draco feel even worse. He had noticed that on the evenings when he avoided Harry, Harry went out clubbing alone. He would stumble home in the early hours of the morning, off his face and clumsy. But when the two of them stayed up talking, Harry had a glass of wine and went to bed.

“Morning,” said Potter.

“When I was little, someone told me a story about a little boy who slipped into another world. The people there wore clothes made out of the sky. When he got there, a beautiful witch asked him what sort of sky he wanted his robes to be cut from—sunset, cloudy, summer, starry night—she had them all folded up in drawers. But the little boy wanted to see *how* they cut the sky, so he asked for the colour it was just then: cold winter morning. The beautiful witch unfolded a ladder, climbed it, and cut a swatch of pale blue from the sky with a pair enchanted fabric sheers. When she came back, she made the little boy a set of the most exquisite robes imaginable; pale blue, like a cold winter morning.”

Potter stared at him. Draco could feel the blood rushing to his face.

“So,” he said, unhappily. “That’s why pale blue is my favourite colour. Why is green yours?”

Potter blinked a few times.

“People are always telling me I have my mother’s eyes,” he said. “So that’s part of it. Also I just look quite good in green.”

Draco felt as if he had taken all his clothes off and danced around the kitchen naked. He went to the counter and filled the kettle.

“Tea?”

“Yes, please. I liked that story.”

“There was more to it, I think. Something about the boy defeating the forces of evil. Of course, my poor little queer heart was set on robes cut from the sky the moment I heard it.”

“Are you?”

“Sorry?”

“Queer?”

This was far more than Draco had intended to reveal.

“English breakfast or Earl Grey?” he asked. *Smooth.*

“English breakfast,” said Potter. “Who told you the story?”

a) The truth: my father - *Impossible, he hates my father, or would, if my father weren't dead*

b) Severus - *Impossible, he hated Severus*

c) My mother - *Impossible, if he says anything nasty about her I'll punch him and end up in Azkaban*

Potter was still waiting for him to answer.

“I don't remember,” said Draco.

Potter snorted in disbelief, but didn't pry.

“Thank you for telling me,” he said. “I like hearing about you, you know.”

“Mm,” said Draco. Potter hesitated.

“Your mum...”

Draco turned sharply back to the cups of tea. He would not punch Potter. He would not.

“She saved my life,” finished Potter. “Did you know?”

“What,” breathed Draco.

“When Voldemort—”

Draco shuddered and squeezed his head. He felt like throwing up. A metallic blood taste filled his mouth.

“Oh, pull yourself together,” said Potter impatiently. “Once he’d cursed me, he asked your mum to check if I was dead. She lied and said I was.”

Draco still didn’t trust himself to speak. His tongue felt loose in his mouth. Potter went on.

“She asked me if you were alive. I think she just wanted everything to be over so that you would be safe. Did she tell you any of this?”

Draco shook his head. There hadn’t been time. They had gone back to the Manor after the battle. His mother had cried so much Draco had worried she would be ill. His father broke a chair and went to his study to drink. The next day the aurors came.

His mother begged him to forgive her over and over, panicked, clawing at him. His father had done so only once, roughly, after he broke the chair.

“Forgive me, Draco. I love you.”

He looked so *mortal*.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” said Draco. “I love you too.”

He told both his parents that, because it was what they needed to hear. He was glad he had told them, since he wouldn’t have had another chance to say it.

It was after he said the words that the anger started to burn through him. He still felt it now, blinding him.

“I owe my life to her,” said Potter. Draco didn’t say anything. He took the teabags out and threw them in the bin.

“Milk?” he asked, although he already knew how Harry took his tea.

“Yeah,” said Potter. “I guess what I’m getting at is that you can tell me, if she’s the one who told you the story.”

“She wasn’t.”

“Oh.”

Draco knew he had just revealed it was his father who used to sit at his bedside and make up stories for him. To his utmost horror, a hot tear came coursing down his cheek.

He splashed milk into the tea, but couldn’t bring it to Potter until he regained control of himself. He made a whole show of washing up a spoon to stir it with.

“Well, if you ever want to talk about your mum—” said Harry.

“I don’t.”

“Okay.”

The tears were getting worse. It was time to abandon ship.

“...think Kreacher’s calling me,” he mumbled. He dipped his head so that his hair covered his face and fled the room. Apparently, that was something he would be doing a lot of, from now on.

Things changed a little after that. Draco had decided that, to keep Harry off his back, he would volunteer harmless information about himself. Harry had as good as told him that anything relating to Draco’s mother counted as

harmless, which opened up a rich vein of Draco Malfoy anecdotes. Not that he dipped very far into them. Anything he shared had to pass a fairly rigorous set of filters. Before he opened his mouth, he asked himself:

- a) is this story interesting?
- b) Is there any reference, however fleeting, to my father, He Who Must Not Be Named, Hogwarts, anyone I knew at Hogwarts, pureblood traditions, or myself between the ages of 11-18?
- c) Does this story make me seem pathetic?
- d) Does Harry even care?
- e) Is he still listening or have I spent so long running through the filters that he's started doing something else?

Occasionally, a story would pass muster. Draco told Harry about his first time meeting a ghost (in a park when he was nine; it was a little girl who had fallen off a swing set), about his favourite childhood books, about a holiday he went on to New Orleans where he couldn't understand anyone through their accents and his mother had to cast a subtitle spell for him so that he wouldn't embarrass himself.

Harry called him "Draco" for the first time after that last one. He went back to "Malfoy" right away, but it *did* happen.

Harry told him that the ministry had doubled his stipend.

"Oh, really?" asked Draco. Harry rubbed the back of his neck.

"Yeah, they, um, they thought three galleons might not be enough."

"That's really generous of them," said Draco seriously, and Harry blushed. He was handsome when he blushed.

Harry came back from the pub wasted.

He went to the pub with Weasley and Granger quite often. Draco was never invited, of course. Which was fine, he didn't expect to be. His mother's tricks for making people like him worked best one-on-one, anyway. Weasley wasn't coming back to school that year—he was running some sort of joke shop?—and so Draco would have a chance to charm Granger once he was back at school. The fact that she had recently been tortured in his living room was, admittedly, something of an obstacle. But he would try.

Usually, Harry returned from the pub a little merry, had a glass of wine with Draco, and relaxed into happy conversation.

Today, however, he was clearly plastered, and Draco knew why. Tomorrow was the last of the trials: Fenrir Greyback's.

"Didn't you fucking live with him, or something?" he slurred.

"No," said Draco shortly. He had no desire to discuss Greyback. Potter reached out an arm and awkwardly dragged Draco into the living room. It was the first time they had touched since Draco's trial. Draco had been extraordinarily careful to keep his distance. He remembered how maddening the desire to be touched by Potter had been, in fifth year. He remembered the fights he had started with Harry because of it.

"Come sit," said Potter. Draco had to obey. It wasn't just that he would be punished if he didn't—it was that he was compelled to do whatever Potter commanded, with all the force of an Imperius curse. He was sure they had used aspects of that in crafting the prisoner's bond.

"What d'you reckon he deserves?" asked Harry, swirling his fresh glass of firewhisky.

"What do *you* think he deserves?" countered Draco.

"I don't fucking know. Did you see what he did to Lavender Brown's face?"

Draco shook his head. Potter looked at him and gave an angry bark of laughter.

“And Bill Weasley. That was your fault, of course.”

I could say I'm sorry, thought Draco. He's drunk. He probably won't even remember it. I could just tell him.

“He was fit before, too,” Potter went on. He glanced up at Draco. “You're fit.”

Draco grew very still.

“Come here,” said Potter. Alarm bells were ringing in Draco's head. It wasn't that he didn't want to have sex with Potter. God, he absolutely did, more than anything, had wanted it for years... But Harry would feel awful about it in the morning, for so many reasons.

He sat next to Potter, who put an arm around him and drew him close. *Merlin*, it felt good; he couldn't remember the last time someone had touched him like that, not because they had to, or because they wanted to hurt him.

He had to remind Potter about the bond. Potter always seemed to forget, ordering Draco to do things without meaning to.

He decided to wait a little longer before reminding him.

“You're gay,” said Potter.

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” said Draco.

“You said, the other day. Said you were queer. Like me.”

Although Draco already knew this (Potter didn't read the Prophet, but it still came to his house without fail every morning, and Draco had read more than one thick piece about Potter's sexuality), it was still extraordinary to hear him say it like that.

“You’re gay and you’re fit and you’re in my house,” said Potter. His breath reeked of alcohol. His eyes were painfully green. “You’re in my *arms*, Malfoy.”

His brain was short-circuiting at the prospect of being ordered to do all the things he wanted most. Of being forced, helpless to stop himself, to give in to his feelings.

Harry would be so horrified to have taken advantage of him, though. And it wasn’t just Harry who would be hurt by this. Draco would be, too, when Harry woke up filled with disgust at what had happened. He would stop talking to Draco, stop bringing him sporadic cups of tea, he would certainly never call him “Draco” again.

“Kiss—” began Potter, but Draco cut him off.

“I have to obey you. Please don’t forget.”

Potter leapt up from the sofa as if it had burned him.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“It’s fine.”

“Fuck!”

“Potter. Go to bed.”

“I was just about to—”

“It’s fine.”

“Oh, fucking *fuck*.”

“Goodnight, Potter.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” said Potter.

“Don’t be. Just get some sleep.”

Draco swept out of the room.

His mother was waiting for him upstairs.

“He wants to sleep with me,” he told her. It was a weird thing to tell your mother, but then again, his mother was dead, his life was empty, and the person he relied on for absolutely everything was going to wake up the next morning feeling humiliated because of him. Draco was pretty desperate.

“Tricky,” said his mother. She stroked her chin.

“Maybe I should just do it,” said Draco hopefully.

She shook her head, apparently unperturbed by this suggestion, which was out of character for her.

“No. Once lust is sated, the object of desire becomes loathsome. You are already too loathed to take such a risk.”

He knew she was right, but the words were still sharp and painful.

“I could offer to let him oblivate me.”

“He won’t do that.”

“Pretend nothing happened?”

“He will want to talk to you about the bond. He may even suggest it be removed. It will alarm him that he might have forced you to do something you didn’t want to.”

As if he could.

“You said negative experiences attach themselves to the people they are connected with. This is a negative experience, and he’s going to connect it to me,” said Draco.

“Yes,” said his mother. “It’s tricky. Of course, once you get to Hogwarts, you will widen your net. It’s dangerous for one person to have so much power over you. You need other people to love you. Then it won’t matter that he doesn’t.”

“Right,” said Draco. It was late. He was tired.

“I’ve got it,” said his mother. “Tell him that *you’re* in love with *him!*”

“What?” said Draco, his voice strangled.

“Oh, yes. Then he won’t feel he misread your signals. You can appeal to his better nature and say you should wait until the bond is removed, and he will pity your unrequited love!”

“I’m not doing that. This is all messing with his head enough as it is.”

“Then he will hate you.”

“Fine!”

“My boy, my sweet...”

“I’m tired. I can’t. I won’t.”

His mother looked at him with weary eyes.

“Do you feel remorse?” she asked him. He knew she would. She always did.

“No,” he said, and something heavy settled in his chest.

6. Chapter 6

Draco stayed in his bedroom until after Potter left for the trial, and Potter didn't return until after dinner. Draco passed the time making treacle tart, which he figured Harry liked, since he always ate it so aggressively whenever it was offered at Hogwarts.

He was just pulling it out of the oven when Harry appeared in the doorway.

"Hey," he said, solemnly.

"How was the trial?"

"It was..." Harry ran his hands through his hair. *Dark as a blackboard*, though Draco dully. "Whatever. He's getting the Kiss tonight."

"I made treacle tart."

"Malfoy."

"Have you had dinner already?"

"Malfoy, I'm so sorry about last night."

"Potter. Don't be so unbearably *good*. You were drunk, nothing happened, it's fine."

"I think we should remove the bond."

Draco tried to keep his face from betraying him. His mother had warned him Harry would say this. It still hurt. Why was it that anticipating pain never lessened it?

His mother hadn't told him how to respond, however. Draco thought through his options.

- a) Please don't make me go back to Azkaban - *Impossible. Pathetic.*
- b) If you like. - *Impossible. He'll take me at my word.*
- c) Please, please don't make me go back to Azkaban - *Impossible, impossible*
- d) Please, I don't think I can face it, I'll go mad, I'm already going mad, please...! - *Impossible, what is wrong with you?*

"What are you thinking?" asked Harry.

Draco was shocked into answering.

"I don't want to go back to Azkaban." He looked down at his treacle tart. It had turned out better than expected. *You mustn't appear to be selfish*, his mother had said. "But I understand if this isn't working out for you. It's up to you, of course."

"I... this bond stuff is messing with my head."

Draco nodded, his stomach flipping over with unhappiness.

"Yeah, of course. I'll just. I'll go pack my stuff."

"I won't let them send you to Azkaban."

Draco laughed.

"Potter... you aren't *actually* king of the Wizarding World. You do know that?"

"Fuck," sighed Harry, sitting at the kitchen table. "I almost ordered you to kiss me last night. This is so fucked up."

He looked awful. Handsomely so, but still. It was taking a toll on him. *Draco* was taking a toll on him.

“Potter...” Draco paused. He couldn’t think of a way to reassure Harry without talking about himself. He would just have to try, and hope he didn’t come off as pathetic. “I trust you not to want to take advantage.”

A muscle was going in Harry’s jaw.

“You really think they’ll send you back to Azkaban if we remove the bond?”

Draco was 100% sure they would. More than that, Harry would then lose any power to positively affect Draco’s sentence—they would point to the failed bond and say he had proven himself inconsistent. But Harry looked so worn, and Draco was starting to feel like *he* was the jailer, not Harry.

“I don’t know. Maybe not,” he said.

“You’re lying.”

“I don’t know, Potter. It’s possible, isn’t it? Or maybe they’d reduce my sentence to one year.”

Harry shook his head.

“You’re lying. Okay. We’ll keep it.”

A wave of relief washed over Draco. He realised he’d been digging his nails into his palms.

“Thank you.”

“God, don’t thank me, I fucking accosted you last night.”

Draco wasn’t going to follow his mother’s advice. But Harry was so embarrassed. He had to give him something.

“Look, I...I *am* gay.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to snog me!”

“No, but I also think you’re fit. I don’t think we should do anything—”

“No.” Potter shuddered. He must have been absolutely trashed the night before, to be able to overcome his aversion. Not for the first time, Draco remembered the way Harry had looked when the judge told him to touch Draco’s Mark. Like he’d been asked to lick a toilet.

“But you weren’t... you weren’t misreading the signals,” continued Draco. “So don’t beat yourself up, yeah?”

Potter sighed and rubbed his scar.

“Yeah, all right. Is that really treacle tart?”

“It is.”

“I love your newfound baking talent.”

Draco turned around quickly because—

“I love your” was not the same as “I love you”, not by any stretch of the imagination. But it was something about him that Potter didn’t hate, and that was a victory in Draco’s book.

They would be returning to Hogwarts in a few days. Draco felt raw and unstable after the drunk-Potter-hitting-on-him-and-then-almost-sending-him-back-to-Azkaban-because-he-felt-embarrassed incident, and because he knew Hogwarts was going to be awful.

He wasn’t sleeping well, which made it harder for him to control himself. He was so tired all the time. Maybe if he hadn’t been so tired, he wouldn’t have broken down the way he did, the next time Harry commanded him to do something.

They were returning to Hogwarts soon. Harry had written to Professor McGonagall to get permission for Malfoy to come, and she had been extremely difficult to persuade. It was only when Harry said he wouldn't get his NEWTS if Malfoy couldn't return that she relented.

Things had been weird since the kissing incident. Malfoy mostly avoided him, and when he didn't, he was more than usually quiet. But he had also started touching Harry, in small, innocuous ways that Harry felt sure would drive him crazy.

Malfoy was gay. He thought Harry was fit.

Harry went out clubbing alone and picked up a cute blond guy. But although the sex took the edge off, it was bland. He didn't *know* the cute blond guy.

Malfoy sat next to Harry on the sofa and curled up his feet. The tips of his stockinged toes touched Harry's thigh. There was no reason it should be erotic. Harry wasn't into feet.

No, he was just into Malfoy.

He stared unseeingly at his page and thought of every awful thing Malfoy had ever done. There were so many to keep track of that he couldn't manage it. That evening, he wrote it out on a piece of paper. The list went on and on, dozens of reasons why Malfoy was a fucking awful person.

Didn't stop him being gorgeous.

Also, he hadn't exactly been awful recently, had he? He'd been nothing but considerate, really. He hadn't even tried to convince Harry to keep the bond, even though it meant returning to Azkaban.

Harry dug out the prisoner bond pamphlet and read it, cover-to-cover. It didn't say anything about changing the prisoner's personality.

Hermione would probably tell him Malfoy had changed, and maybe he had. But it seemed to Harry that Malfoy avoided thinking about the war so thoroughly that he couldn't possibly have had a change of heart about it. And it bothered Harry endlessly that he wouldn't call Voldemort by his name. It was such a Death Eater reaction, as if Malfoy still expected Voldemort to pop up from the grave and punish him. As if Malfoy still revered and admired him.

It came up again the day before they left for Hogwarts. They were sitting in the kitchen, eating a rhubarb cake that Malfoy had baked, talking about Hogwarts. Harry wondered if it would look different. He didn't say "since the battle," but Malfoy's face still closed off.

"I suppose He Who Must Not Be Named will have left his mark," he said, and Harry saw red.

"Call him Voldemort!"

It was a command. He could see Malfoy sit up as it hit him.

"I can't," he said, his voice strained.

"You're such a fucking coward, Malfoy," sneered Harry. "Big enough to join the Death Eaters, but you can't even say your master's name, not even after I killed him."

Malfoy had turned red. He clutched his fork like a weapon. Harry suddenly realised that he hadn't seen Malfoy get angry since— maybe since he cursed him in sixth year.

But he wasn't just angry. His whole body was shaking, and his teeth started to chatter. When he spoke, the words were wobbly and furious.

"You think—fuck you—as if it's the same—I can't—he didn't *expect* you to respect him—you don't—I can't—"

He snapped his mouth shut and stood up. Harry thought he was going to run away, the way he always did, but he just stood, shivering, in the centre of

the kitchen.

“I called him that once—to his face—after—he had made me tortu—I was so angry—”

He stopped himself, put his hands to his jaw to try to stop the chattering of his teeth. He looked wild.

“Do you know what he did to me?”

Harry didn’t dare move.

Draco’s eyes seemed to burn through him.

“*I don’t remember,*” he said. “It’s gone—except I dream—I think—I think he let Aunt Bella cut out my tongue—”

He looked vacant for a moment, then his rage seemed to jolt him back.

“You have *no* idea—you think you’re so brave—I taste blood every time you say it—I can’t—you can’t *make* me—any more than *he* could stop me —”

Draco was panting, and Harry wasn’t sure when he had stood, when he had come to join Draco, when he had put a finger under Draco’s chin and tilted it up.

“Would you let me see your tongue?” he asked. He didn’t know why, but it was important. He had to check it was okay.

“They grew it back,” said Draco. “Eventually.”

“I know. Can I see it?”

Draco frowned, but he opened his mouth wide and let his tongue hang out. Harry touched it gently with one finger. It felt weird, because tongues *were* weird, but also it felt like something he wanted to inspect much more closely, possibly with his mouth.

“I thought... I thought you couldn’t say it because you still admired him so much,” he said, and Draco made a little sound of disbelief. He was still shivering. He licked Harry’s finger before pulling his tongue back. Harry was touching Draco’s bottom lip now. He traced it. Draco trembled.

“Call him whatever you want,” said Harry. “I’m sorry.”

Draco leant into his hand. Their faces were almost touching.

“You don’t understand,” he said in a small voice.

“No,” agreed Harry. “I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

He was going to kiss him. Draco was going to let him. He could feel it. Draco’s eyes were half shut already, and he was still so shaky and upset, and Harry just wanted to kiss him until Draco knew how sorry he was. Because he should have known, really, that Draco wasn’t the same anymore — he should have known at Draco’s trial, when Harry had balked at touching his Mark, and Draco had reacted with understanding. Had asked him if he was all right, even though Draco was the one who had just lost both parents.

And then Harry remembered how powerless Draco was in this relationship. If anything went wrong, he would lose everything.

He pulled away. Draco opened his eyes. He didn’t seem angry anymore, just frazzled, distracted.

“Fuck, you’re so gorgeous,” said Harry, involuntarily. Draco’s eyes widened. “Sorry. I keep invading your personal space.”

“S’okay,” choked Draco.

“We shouldn’t,” said Harry.

“No,” said Draco, but he licked his lips.

They stared at each other. Harry had the impression that they were both waiting for the other to say, “...but fuck it, let’s do it anyway.”

Neither of them spoke.

“I have to pack,” said Harry, and ripped himself away from the room in which Draco Malfoy stood, hungry-eyed, waiting to be kissed.

7. Chapter 7

They were flooing to Hogwarts. Professor McGonagall wanted to talk to them, and anyway she thought it was best that they avoid the crowds on the train. Harry stood uncertainly by the fireplace, holding the pot of floo powder.

“Are you okay?” asked Draco.

“Don’t like flooing,” said Harry. Draco waited. He was good at that; knowing when there was more. “The green light.”

“Yeah, I’m not too keen on it myself,” said Draco. Harry knew he probably understood better than most people. “I’ll go first, then.”

“Thanks,” said Harry gratefully.

Once Draco had gone through, Harry took a few deep breaths. The green light had made his heart rate spike. He calmed himself down, took a handful of floo powder, and managed not to flinch at the green light that followed his words.

Draco was curled up in a ball on the floor of Professor McGonagall’s office.

“He fell out screaming,” said Professor McGonagall, her face white.

Draco crawled to a waste paper basket and was sick. Harry rushed to his side and held his hair out of his face.

“The proximity thing,” said Harry. “I forgot!”

“Me, too,” said Draco. His hair was damp with sweat. Harry put a hand on his back to steady him. When Draco was done throwing up, Professor McGonagall handed him a glass of water and vanished the contents of the waste paper basket.

“Perhaps you had better spend the night in the infirmary, Mr. Malfoy,” said Professor McGonagall.

“I’m all right,” said Draco. “It just took me by surprise.” He got slowly to his feet and went to sit in one of the chairs in front of Professor McGonagall’s desk. “You wanted to speak to us, Professor?”

“Well...” Professor McGonagall seemed completely thrown by Draco’s behaviour. “Perhaps we ought to wait until you feel better.”

“Please don’t mention it again, I feel humiliated enough,” said Draco sharply. His slight rudeness seemed to fortify Professor McGonagall.

“Very well. Mr. Malfoy, I must inform you that it is against my better judgment that you have been allowed to return to this school. Let me assure you that if I hear the smallest whisper of any wrongdoing on your part, you will be sent away immediately. And I don’t mean with Mr. Potter, I mean back to Azkaban. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Professor,” said Draco politely.

Professor McGonagall proceeded to outline the conditions of Malfoy’s stay at Hogwarts. Harry was to accompany him to all lessons, including the ones they had separately. Malfoy’s wand was to be returned to him, but he was only allowed to use magic in classrooms, under teacher supervision. Harry could only leave him alone in their room, in the library, or for the brief moments when Malfoy had finished a lesson he didn’t share with Harry and waited for Harry to come get him. The Defence Against The Dark Arts teacher would check Malfoy’s wand once a week to verify that he hadn’t used it illicitly. It went on and on, but Draco’s expression did not shift from one of polite interest.

“Do you understand?” asked Professor McGonagall, at the end of her speech.

“Yes, Professor,” said Draco. Professor McGonagall’s face softened slightly.

“Are you sure you don’t want to see Madam Pomfrey? You gave me quite a scare.”

“I’m fine,” said Draco, looking deeply embarrassed.

“He just needs a bit of rest,” said Harry. “Could we maybe have dinner in our room, and skip the feast?”

“Good idea, Mr. Potter,” said Professor McGonagall. “I’ll take you to your rooms.”

To Harry’s very great relief, they were not sharing. Harry hadn’t felt optimistic about his chances of not being a massive perv if he had to share with Draco the whole year. Professor McGonagall had arranged for them to have a suite, with two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a living room. She summoned them a tray of sandwiches, asked Draco once more if he was all right (“Yes, thank you,” he said, through gritted teeth), and left.

“I’m so sorry,” said Harry.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

They were standing right next to each other. Harry turned to face him and put his hand on Draco’s forehead to feel his temperature.

“I’m *fine*, Potter. I’m used to the Cruciatus curse. I only fell apart like that because I didn’t see it coming.”

Harry’s hand roved over Draco’s face, ending up on the back of his neck. They both leant forwards so that their foreheads touched.

“It’s pretty depressing to hear you say you’re used to the Cruciatus curse,” said Harry.

“That was probably an exaggeration.”

“I’m sorry McGonagall went all hard arse on you.”

“Now you’re just looking for things to apologise for,” said Draco. Their noses were touching, their lips only inches from each other. Harry could scarcely breathe. Draco’s hair was silky in his hand. He wanted to find out all of Draco’s textures.

“You don’t want to kiss me right now,” said Draco softly. “I’m disgusting.”

Harry stepped sharply back.

“I don’t want to kiss you at all,” he said. He was speaking more to himself than to Draco, but Draco looked as if he’d slapped him. “I mean, I do. I’m attracted to you. Obviously.”

Draco watched him silently. He was doing that thing he did where he tried to calculate what to say next. Harry waited. Draco often did this; he ran through options in his head, and half the time he apparently decided there wasn’t anything to say to Harry, and walked away. Occasionally, however, he would speak.

But Harry wasn’t patient enough.

“Look, whatever it is that you’re thinking about, you can just say it.”

Draco cast him a guarded look. Ten seconds passed, as Draco (Harry assumed) processed this new statement and ran through possible responses with military thoroughness, before he finally answered.

“The stakes are rather high, for me,” he said.

Harry’s insides twisted. It was a typically cryptic remark. Harry wanted to think that the stakes were high in part because Draco liked him back, but of course it was far more likely that he was referring to Harry’s total power over him through the bond.

“I know,” said Harry.

“You need to decide what you want from me,” said Draco.

Harry didn't like the sound of that at all. It made it seem as if Draco had no choice in the matter. Which, in a way, he didn't. It would be pretty difficult to spurn the advances of your jailer.

"Look, you're really fucking fit, so I keep forgetting this, but I think we should just be friends."

To Harry's immense surprise, Draco's whole face lit up. Harry had never seen him look like that, as if he had just won something he'd only dreamed of.

"Friends?" said Draco, with a lopsided grin.

"Yeah," said Harry uneasily.

"Okay," said Draco. He made a sound that could only be described as a *giggle*. "Right. Friends. Shall we eat some sandwiches?"

Merlin, he was going to drive Harry mad.

Draco's mother was waiting for him in his bedroom.

"He wants to be friends," said Draco, managing to keep his voice low despite his excitement.

But his mother didn't look excited back.

"He likes how you make him feel," she said. "It doesn't mean he likes *you*."

"No, I... I know that," said Draco, although it hadn't really occurred to him. It sounded so obvious when she put it like that.

Distantly, a small voice in his head objected that his mother would never have said anything so cruel. But Draco ignored it, because it didn't matter—she had said it, now. Anyway, it was true.

“He can’t love you until you feel remorse,” said his mother.

“But I can’t feel remorse just so that he’ll love me,” said Draco.

“Therein lies the problem,” said his mother, and disappeared.

“Do you mind if we eat at the Gryffindor table?” asked Harry, as they walked downstairs the next morning.

“No,” said Draco automatically, but then he remembered. “Yes.”

Harry stopped walking to look at him.

“What?”

“Dean Thomas,” said Draco.

“...yeah?”

“I can’t sit at the same table as him,” said Draco.

“I’m sure if you just apologise—”

“I’m not apologising to him!”

Harry looked so disappointed that he reminded Draco of his father.

“Why not?” asked Harry, clearly trying to stay calm.

“Because—”

Draco started pacing back and forth along the corridor. His thoughts were too scrambled for him to even try to put them through the filters. Because! Because sometimes apologising was the most selfish thing you could do! Because asking someone to forgive you when they shouldn’t have to was manipulative! Because Dean Thomas shouldn’t have to look at him three times a day just because Harry wanted to fuck Draco and had used his social cachet to pull him out of Azkaban!

“Why not, Malfoy?’ repeated Potter, his voice terrifyingly cold, just as it always used to be.

“He shouldn’t have to see me again!”

He paused in his pacing to glance at Potter, whose expression had mercifully changed.

“Draco... you can’t think like that.”

Draco’s eyes opened in horror as the command took hold, and he strained to clear his thoughts—

“Shit sorry no think whatever you want!” said Harry. “I just meant, you’re not going to be able to move forward with that attitude.”

Draco felt calm enough now to implement his filters. He ran through a few options before speaking.

“Sometimes, apologising is the selfish thing to do,” he said.

His mother, weeping uncontrollably into his lap, saying “Forgive me, forgive me...”

“I think Dean deserves an apology,” said Harry.

Draco chewed on his lip.

“Let me stay in the room this morning, and give him a note from me.”

“You can’t apologise by note!”

Draco cast him a resentful look at the order, and Harry looked ashamed of himself.

“I mean, you can. Just, it’s not a good idea.”

“The note would be to ask him if he’d be willing to let me apologise, you twat. I’m not going to jump out of the bushes at him and say ‘Surprise! I’m

sorry I didn't stop my family from torturing you! Enjoy the eggs benedict!"

Harry grinned.

"You haven't called me a twat in such a long time. I've missed it."

"Will you take him a note?"

"Yeah. And if he's up for it, I'll bring him to our rooms after breakfast."

Draco felt about in his robes for a Quick Quill and some parchment and scribbled Dean a short note.

Dean,

I would like to apologise to you, but only if doing so will not cause you more pain than I have already brought upon you. If you are willing, Potter will bring you to me after breakfast. If you would prefer that I never speak to you again, please let him know, and I will of course submit to your preference.

Sincerely,

D. Malfoy

He handed the note to Harry.

"I think you'll have to order me away," he said. "For the proximity."

"Oh," said Harry, looking embarrassed. "Okay. I don't really like telling you what to do."

Draco answered before he could stop himself.

"I quite like it."

Harry swallowed.

“I mean, obviously I don’t like, you know. Being a prisoner,” said Draco, horrified. “I don’t want you to start giving me...chores. I only meant sexually. I mean. Fuck.”

If Draco hadn’t been so embarrassed, the look on Harry’s face might have made him laugh.

“Yeah, I’m going to pretend you never said any of that,” said Harry. Then he winced. “Okay. Er. Go to our rooms.”

“Thank you,” said Draco, and hurried away, his heart racing.

8. Chapter 8

“I only meant sexually”?? Draco liked being ordered around but *only sexually*? How the hell was Harry supposed to think about anything else ever again, now that he knew *that*?

He gave Dean the note with bad grace and stabbed angrily at his sausages and eggs.

“Is everything all right with you and Malfoy?” asked Hermione, looking concerned.

“Oh, just peachy,” said Harry, mutilating a cooked tomato.

“If he’s being difficult, Harry, you mustn’t feel guilty about sending him back. It’s far too much responsibility, and—”

“No, he’s—it’s nothing like that, Hermione. And don’t talk about sending him back like that, as if he’s a pair of shoes that came in the wrong size. You’re talking about sending him to *Azkaban*.”

“It’s not as if he didn’t do anything to merit being there, Harry.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry, because that was part of the problem. He had thought he more or less trusted Draco, but the moment Draco said he wouldn’t apologise to Dean, Harry had instantly lost faith in him. Unfairly, as it turned out. But still. Clearly Harry wasn’t over the past. And the power dynamics were crazy. And also, it really wasn’t all that clear what Draco wanted out of all this. *Harry* had been quite open about how attracted he was to Draco, but Draco was so reluctant to give anything away that it was impossible to know if he liked all of their intense moments or if he only tolerated them.

And now Harry knew that he liked being ordered around. Only sexually, of course. Merlin.

“Yeah, I’ll see him,” said Dean, looking up from Draco’s note.

“Great,” said Harry, distractedly. “He’ll be pleased.”

“Is he less of a wanker now?”

“He’s not wanking,” said Harry.

Everyone stared at him.

“Uh. What was the question?”

A look of understanding was dawning in Hermione’s eyes.

“Harry,” she hissed, once everyone had stopped laughing at him. “*Tell me* you don’t fancy him. *Please*. Because you know as well as I do that that would be a total disaster. He’s a *Death Eater*. And your *prisoner*.”

“I don’t fancy him! I just, you know, appreciate his... look. It’s, er, aesthetic.” Something cleared in his head, and he turned to look at Hermione more seriously. “Also, he’s changed. I think he feels really guilty about everything and it’s making him into a better person.”

Hermione sighed.

“Harry, I want to believe in redemption as much as you do, but he has every incentive to make you think that.”

“So, what, he can’t possibly change for the better now, because our side won the war?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I just want you to be careful. Who knows how he’s reacting to the bond?”

“It doesn’t affect personality. I checked.”

“I don’t mean a magical reaction. I mean that he might have decided that the best way to ensure he’ll be treated well is to make sure you think he’s reformed, regardless of whether he actually is.”

Harry thought of Draco anxiously pacing the corridor as he tried to think what to say. If Hermione's theory was right, then Draco—Malfoy—had been trying to figure out what would most convince Harry to like him.

"Okay," he said. "So imagine he pretends to be reformed for a year, and does a bunch of nice stuff for everyone. Does that mean it's not real? That it doesn't count?"

"It only counts if he feels remorse, Harry."

Harry sighed. As always, there was the fact that Draco simply did not seem to think about the war. He shut down whenever they skirted close to it.

He took Dean to their rooms. Draco leapt to his feet when they walked in, and went very pale at the sight of Dean.

"Er, I've just got to do something, in my room," said Harry, but neither of them were paying attention to him. He went into his bedroom and tried not to listen. The walls were much thicker than at Grimmauld Place, and he could only make out the murmur of Draco's voice.

After about fifteen minutes, there was a knock on his door. He opened it to see Draco, still looking rather unwell. Dean had gone.

"How did it go?"

"I don't know," said Draco. His eyes were vague. "We've got five minutes until lessons. I was wondering if I might have my wand?"

"Yeah, of course." Harry got it out of his trunk and gave it back to Draco, who stared at it blankly for a few seconds before pocketing it.

"Would you take me to Arithmancy now?" he asked.

"Lead the way."

"I'm sorry if I've made you late for your own lesson," said Draco, as they strode along the corridor. People stared and whispered wherever they went.

“It’s fine. Are you okay? How did Dean take it?”

“Better than could be expected,” said Draco. He looked so worried.

“I’m sorry I freaked out when you said you couldn’t apologise.”

“What?” Draco seemed to jerk out of a daydream.

“I acted like you couldn’t apologise because you weren’t actually sorry, or something.”

Draco shook his head in exasperation.

“Don’t... Merlin, Potter.”

They had arrived at Draco’s classroom. Harry grabbed him by the left forearm, and Draco went abruptly still.

“What is it, Potter?” he asked. Harry couldn’t answer. He didn’t have anything to say. He had just wanted to touch Draco, to let him know that he was there.

“Nothing,” he said, letting go of Draco’s arm. Draco touched his sleeve where Harry’s hand had been. “Have a good class. I’ll come get you after.”

But Harry completely forgot to get Draco after his Defence Against the Dark Arts class, and it was only twenty minutes later, when Hermione asked “Where’s Draco?” that he remembered. It had felt so normal to be in class with the Gryffindors, so pleasantly comfortable, that he had gone to the library with Hermione just as he usually would have, without thinking.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed loudly. Two first-year girls looked at him in alarm. “Sorry,” he said.

He raced across the castle, preparing himself to face Draco’s wrath, but it didn’t come. Draco stood quietly by the Arithmancy classroom, a grim look on his pale face. He brightened when he saw Harry.

“You came!”

“I’m sorry!”

“What happened? Did you get lost? Swamped by fans?”

“No, I just forgot.”

Hurt flashed momentarily in Draco’s eyes before he looked down.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry again.

“Not a problem.”

“We’re working in the library, if you want to come?”

Draco frowned.

“‘We?’”

“Hermione and me.”

“Ah.”

“You can’t avoid her forever, Draco, she’s one of my best friends.”

Draco glared at him.

“I wish you wouldn’t phrase things as orders all the time. I obviously wasn’t *going* to avoid her forever, there’s no need for you to command it.”

“It’s really hard, okay? Imperatives are an important part of our language!”

Draco slouched against the wall and stroked his eyebrow with one finger. He looked tired and unhappy.

“Is it going to make Granger uncomfortable if I’m there?”

“At first, yeah! But then she’ll get used to it! That’s how change works. So will you please stop *worrying* and come to the library?”

Unexpectedly, Draco smiled at him.

“You didn’t order me, that time.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, well, I never *want* to order you around.” Then he thought of what Draco had said earlier. “I mean, unless you wanted me to.”

Draco flushed.

“The library,” he said, sounding rather panicked. “Let’s go there, to the library.”

Their hands brushed against each other a few times as they walked. Neither of them mentioned it.

Draco was quiet around Hermione. He did his work and seemed intent on not getting in the way. Over the next few days, he was like Harry’s ghost. He was silent at the Gryffindor table at meals, silent in the library, and silent in class. Only in their private rooms did he come alive, although it felt like a muted version of the rapport they had built at Grimmauld Place, because he was clearly so unhappy.

In Defence Against The Dark Arts, Harry asked Dean how the apology had gone.

“It was truly weird,” said Dean. “He didn’t apologise about the war, only for not being in Azkaban. He seemed really cut up about that, though. Luna said the same thing.”

“When did he apologise to her?”

“They have Charms together, so after that, I guess? Luna reckons he’s just paranoid about bringing up bad memories.” Dean shook his head. “*Malfoy*.

Mental, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

As Harry had learned in fourth year, there was a lot of time spent in the library when your best friend was Hermione.

It was strange how they were still a trio. He wondered how Ron would feel to know he had been replaced by Draco Malfoy.

He was just thinking this when Draco's slim, pale hand fell upon his wrist. Draco leant into his ear.

"There's a girl taking a picture of you in the Magical Zoology section," he whispered.

"Thanks," said Harry, and Draco moved away. Hermione tracked the motion with her eyes as Harry told the girl with the camera to clear out.

"Mind if I sit?"

It was Ginny. Harry smiled at her and made room.

"Hello; Hermione, Malfoy."

Malfoy nodded a greeting, then turned steadfastly back to his books. Ginny looked at Malfoy, then back at Harry with a questioning look.

"How's it going," she mouthed.

Harry gestured at Draco and mouthed, "Not now!"

"I can go, if that would make this conversation about me easier," said Draco, without looking up.

"I'm just wondering how everything's going with the whole prisoner's bond," said Ginny. "You wouldn't believe what people are saying."

“I could hazard a guess,” said Draco dryly.

“Can you make him do something now?” Ginny asked Harry. “Quick blowie under the table, maybe?”

Harry spluttered.

“Ginny! I would never!”

“You wouldn’t have to do *anything*, in that scenario,” said Draco quietly.

Ginny snorted.

“Relax, Harry, no one here thinks you’ve turned Malfoy into a sex slave.” She paused. “Although the rest of the school does. I’ve been getting some pretty interesting questions. Want to hear what I’ve been telling people?”

“Does it involve my manly hippogriff tattoo?”

“Your *what?*”

Harry laughed at the appalled expression on Draco’s face. This was the most he’d spoken outside of their rooms in days, and Harry liked it.

“Oh, haven’t you seen it yet?” asked Ginny, innocently.

“I thought we’d established that I’m not actually Potter’s sex slave,” said Draco.

“Would everyone please stop talking about sex slaves!” said Hermione.

Ginny and Draco both muttered “sorry”.

Draco picked up his pencil, started to annotate his book, then put the pencil down.

“Do you really have a hippogriff tattoo?”

“Only one way to find out,” said Harry, meeting Draco’s eyes. Draco breathed in sharply and looked away. Harry looked away too, grinning, only to see Ginny and Hermione staring at him. “How’s the team shaping up?” he asked Ginny hastily. Neither he nor Draco had signed up to their house quidditch teams. Harry just didn’t feel up to it—that era had ended—and Draco seemed to be avoiding all things Slytherin.

“Oh, it’s all right, only we’ve had to let Steven Hodges in, even though he’s a twat. But twat or no, he’s a good seeker. Not as good as you, of course,” she added, rather testily.

“Is he good? Steven Hodges?” asked Draco. Harry looked at him in surprise.

“Yeah, but he gives me the creeps,” said Ginny. “Seems like the type to murder people in his basement.”

Draco stiffened. Harry thought he knew why. More than a few people had probably been murdered in the basement of Malfoy Manor.

But if Draco was good at anything, it was at avoiding talking about the war.

“I told Harry he could go pro,” he said, “and do you know what he said?”

“Something about not being deserving?” asked Ginny.

“Got it in one. Said they’d only have him for the PR.”

“Yeah, well, Harry’s always been an idiot. You were actually among the first to spot it.”

Draco frowned, lowering his eyes to his books. Ginny’s smile faded.

“I meant that as a compliment.”

“Ah,” said Draco. “Thank you. Anyway, do try to talk some sense into him.”

“Harry doesn’t listen to me,” said Ginny.

“I’m right here. You don’t need to talk about me in the third person.”

“How come you didn’t join your team, Malfoy?” asked Ginny. “You weren’t so bad.”

“Thanks,” said Draco, with a quiet laugh that made Harry feel something warm in his chest. Draco and Ginny. Getting along.

“So?” pressed Ginny.

Draco looked unseeingly at his book, thinking. Harry knew exactly what he was doing, but Ginny seemed annoyed.

“Earth to Malfoy?”

“He’s thinking,” snapped Harry. “He likes to think before he speaks.”

Draco gave him an unreadable look.

“Why?” asked Ginny. “So that he doesn’t accidentally insult us?”

“No,” said Draco. He opened his mouth to go on, then closed it. Harry knocked his knee against Draco’s under the table, and when Draco startled, Harry smiled at him in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. Draco seemed to relax a little. His whole leg fell against Harry’s.

“I didn’t think it would benefit many people if I was on the Slytherin team,” he said, carefully. “Only me.”

“What a Slytherin way to be selfless,” said Ginny.

“I’m not selfless,” protested Draco.

“You don’t have to *be* selfless to behave selflessly.”

“That’s...” Draco smiled. “A lovely sentiment.”

“Look, are any of you actually planning on doing work?” asked Hermione.

“Sorry,” muttered Ginny and Draco again. Harry moved his leg away from Draco’s, because it felt like all the blood in his body had rushed to it and he wouldn’t be able to use his brain until there was space between them.

They all went back to work.

9. Chapter 9

Ginny started sitting with them more often, after that. She was impatient with Draco's silences and prodded him with a pencil whenever he thought too hard.

"Stop calculating," she would say.

"I'm not calculating."

"What are you thinking, then?"

"That you're relentless!"

"Yes, but what about my question?"

"I don't remember your question."

"Yes, you do. Why don't you drink alcohol?"

"Harry, could you step in, please?"

The first time Draco called him Harry in public, Hermione made shocked noise in the back of her throat. Draco still almost never spoke to her. Harry asked him about it, once.

"She doesn't want me to talk to her," said Draco.

"You'll hurt her feelings if you ignore her all the time."

"I listen to her," said Draco, and it was true— when Hermione spoke, Draco always stopped what he was doing and paid close attention, as if he was in class.

"You should talk to her. You're good at talking."

Draco shook his head.

“No, I’m not.”

But he did start talking to Hermione, after that, asking her careful questions about her work. He seemed to measure every word he spoke three times, and he handled her gently—especially compared with the effortless way he played around with Ginny. Harry couldn’t put his finger on why Draco was so cautious around Hermione. It was an uncomfortable fact that Hermione had been tortured at his house, but that alone didn’t explain it. The only thing that made sense to Harry was that Draco knew Hermione was suspicious of his changed behaviour, and thus didn’t want to expose her to it.

No one was immune to Draco’s conversational abilities, however. Harry returned from the bathroom one day and found Hermione and Draco having a tense discussion that they cut off the moment he sat down. Whatever they talked about, it seemed to improve Hermione’s opinion of Draco greatly.

After a few weeks at Hogwarts, Draco finally seemed a little less unhappy. He and Harry spent a lot of time hanging out in their sitting room, not doing much of anything. Draco had a distracting habit of using furniture incorrectly. He draped himself on the floor, with his feet on the sofa. He lay on the coffee table, and sat cross legged on the desk. He was cat-like in the way he gracefully claimed space, and it made Harry feel more comfortable than anywhere he’d ever been.

He also had not stopped touching Harry. Sometimes, when they were reading in their sitting room, he would give Harry a questioning look, put a pillow in Harry’s lap, and settle his head onto it. The first few times, Harry refrained from stroking his hair, but when it kept happening, he decided Draco clearly didn’t mind a bit of physical intimacy. Harry put his hand on Draco’s head, and Draco closed his eyes with a dreamy smile. Within minutes, he had fallen asleep.

“You’re such a cat,” Harry told him, twenty minutes later, when Draco opened his eyes and stretched.

“That was the best nap I’ve had in about a hundred years,” said Draco.

“Happy to be of service.”

To Harry’s mingled joy and horror, Draco napping on him became a regular part of their life together. As did Draco listening to him with that calm, comforting expression in the evenings, when Harry talked about the war or his childhood. And Draco and Ginny becoming thick as thieves, actually improving Harry’s post-break-up relationship with her.

Draco, Harry was surprised to find, fit into Harry’s life. Neatly. And with him around, that brimming, burning rage in Harry’s chest seemed to evaporate. So much of his life had been spent acclimatising to loss and regret. Draco living with him was the first thing in years that made him feel like change might bring him happiness.

It bothered Harry that the rest of the school thought he was using Draco for sex, but Draco never said anything about it, and generally speaking, people left them alone. Harry occasionally heard barbed remarks (always aimed at Draco, not at him), but Draco never reacted to them, and Harry knew how embarrassed he’d be if he brought it up.

They were working in the library. Ginny whispered something to Draco who smirked and said “That’s a rather personal question, Ginevra.”

“Yes, but I’m not likely to find out the answer, now, am I? You’re not exactly going to have sex with me.”

Harry sat up with a jolt. Draco’s foot found his under the table and pressed him soothingly.

“I don’t think you have what I need, sweetheart,” said Draco.

“I’m just saying. Blaise is sexy. As your friend, I feel I deserve more information.”

“Your application for friendship is still under review.”

“What *about* Zabini?” asked Harry.

“He and I used to hook up, and Ginny has a crush on him. He’s bi, Ginny; I’d say you have a fair chance.”

“Stop trying to hook up my ex-girlfriend with your ex-boyfriend,” said Harry. “It’s weird.”

Draco laughed.

A stinging hex hit him in the face. He gave a little cry and pressed his hands to the wound.

“How dare you laugh?” said the girl who had cast the hex. She was a sixth year. She had appeared suddenly in front of their table and her wand was still drawn. It shook as she pointed it at Draco. Harry, Ginny and Hermione drew their wands.

“Back off,” said Harry. But the girl only had eyes for Draco.

“You ought to rot in Azkaban for the rest of your life,” she said. “*How dare you laugh?*”

“The war is over,” said Harry. “Leave.”

She tore her eyes away from Draco to look at the rest of them.

“You should be ashamed of yourselves, all of you, for associating with him,” she said, and stormed out of the library.

Hermione healed the sting on Draco’s cheek without another word.

“Thank you,” he said.

“She shouldn’t have done that,” said Hermione. Draco didn’t answer. Harry put his hand next to Draco’s and they hooked their little fingers together.

“Are you okay?” asked Ginny.

“Don’t,” said Draco. His hand broke away from Harry’s. “Ginny. Why are you nice to me? I know why Potter puts up with me, and Hermione tolerates

me on his behalf. But you have no reason to be.”

Harry wondered what Draco thought was the reason Harry “put up with” him. Harry worried Draco thought it was sex. Which would be a weird line of reasoning, really, given that they hadn’t *had* sex. Except in Harry’s head, where they had sex all the time. So actually, maybe Draco was onto something, if that was what he thought.

Ginny reached out and grasped one of Draco’s hands.

“I didn’t expect to like you,” she said. “But I decided not to hate you anymore after the battle. Sooner, maybe. Everyone knew you were a shit Death Eater.”

“What,” said Draco blankly.

“Your crucios never worked.”

“What?” repeated Draco, his voice rising slightly as he ripped his hand out of hers.

“Last year. It was common knowledge that if anyone got you as their torturer, all they had to do was pretend they were in pain and writhe around a bit.”

“You have to mean it,” breathed Harry.

Draco had half-risen from his chair. He looked awful.

“But I thought I *did* mean it—”

“Blimey, Draco, I’m trying to say you weren’t evil, don’t get offended!” said Ginny.

“He’s not offended,” said Harry, quickly.

“I thought it worked— every time— even on the first years—”

He was so pale Harry worried he might faint.

“I...” he looked suddenly at Harry. “I...”

“Let’s go back to the room,” said Harry firmly. Draco nodded and fumbled to pack his things into his bag. Harry ended up doing it for him.

“Draco, I’m sorry,” said Ginny. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Don’t—don’t apologise,” he said.

“Why the fuck didn’t you speak at his trial?” asked Harry, as the thought occurred to him. “Do you know that he was convicted of 27 counts of the cruciatus curse?”

“I still bloody cast them, Potter, however ineptly,” said Draco.

“I didn’t think,” said Ginny. “I’m sorry.”

Draco groaned.

“Oh God, *please* don’t apologise anymore...!”

Harry put his hand on Draco’s elbow and steered him out of the library, down the corridor, and into their sitting room.

Draco collapsed onto the sofa and put his head in his hands.

“You were casting the curse at eleven-year-olds and it looked to you as if it worked,” said Harry. Draco nodded. “That must have fucked with your head.”

“I thought I meant it. I mean, I *did* mean it. I tried to, at least.” His eyes darted to Harry. “Fuck. I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Do you think you meant it when you cast it at Rowle?”

Draco didn’t seem surprised that Harry knew about that. He answered with venom before standing and pacing the room.

“Yes.”

“Why do you think I put up with you?” asked Harry.

“What? How should I know?”

“You said you did. You told Ginny you knew why I put up with you.”

Draco stopped pacing.

“You know perfectly well what I meant, Potter.”

“Because of the bond?”

“No.”

“Because I want to sleep with you?”

Draco laughed and started pacing again.

“I shouldn’t have agreed to this,” he said. “Leaving Azkaban. It’s not fair on the other students. The whole thing’s ridiculous.”

“Do I make you uncomfortable?”

“Of course not!”

“I mean, because—”

“I know what you mean, Potter. It doesn’t make me uncomfortable. It fits, actually, you have fucking awful taste in clothes and fucking awful taste in men.”

“I don’t think you’re fucking awful.”

“Yeah, well, you also wear jeans that look as if they were found in a skip.”

“Draco.”

“Fuck, sorry. Sorry. I’m just. I really thought I had tortured those *children* —”

He covered his face with his hands, took a breath, and looked up.

His face was impassive, serene. Harry had been wondering when this would happen. When Draco would regain his senses and start hiding again.

“I’m being dramatic. I apologise. I think I ought to be alone; don’t let me keep you.”

“You don’t need to pretend to be okay.”

“I’m not pretending.”

“Don’t lie.”

Anger flickered across the serene look.

“Sorry! You can lie! Although I’d really rather you didn’t,” said Harry.

“I’m fine. There’s nothing for me to be upset about,” said Draco. He bent over his schoolbag and fumbled inside, as if he was planning on continuing his homework.

“Draco, come on. It’s fine if you’re not okay. Quite apart from anything else, you’ve had a pretty rough year.”

“I’ve had worse,” said Draco, offhand.

“Draco. *Your parents died.*”

Draco froze, and then stood up so quickly that his bag tipped over. Spellbooks and quills spilled out onto the carpet.

“Shit, shit, *shit*,” said Draco, and he raced into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

“Draco?”

Harry went to the door, intending to knock, but something stopped him: Draco’s voice, low, pleading.

“I’m sorry,” he said. *“I didn’t mean it, mother, I’m sorry...”*

10. Chapter 10

Narcissa Malfoy wept inconsolably on the bed.

“Mother, please...I’m sorry... of course it’s been the worst year,” said Draco.

He hadn’t been thinking. How could he have said that?

It was true, of course. His parents dying, losing the war, watching Vincent burn to death, Azkaban... none of that compared, really, to the year after he’d taken the Mark. He was numb, now, in a way he hadn’t been, then. He’d read somewhere that frostbite only hurt to begin with—the pain ended when it was too late to salvage the affected area. That first year had been agony. By the time he realised how permanently he had destroyed his life, the numbness outstripped the pain.

“You said you forgave me,” wept his mother.

“I told you, there’s nothing to forgive,” said Draco. He did not touch her. He knew if he tried, he would not be able to, and the thought appalled him.

He *had* told her he forgave her. He had given both his parents absolution. He had sensed the urgency with which they asked for it. It made him angry, now, to think about. His father had known he was going to be killed by the aurors when they came for him, known he would die rather than return to Azkaban. He must have known, too, that Narcissa would die by his side. Narcissa had never failed to follow him, no matter the consequences for Draco.

They had sought forgiveness and then gone open-armed to death, leaving Draco behind in the emptiness. Had they lived, he would have forgiven them, eventually. Of course he would have. But he would have been allowed a few years to resent them, as he came to terms with the aftermath of the war. He would have been allowed to be a teenager, angry with his parents.

“You didn’t mean it,” sobbed his mother. “You don’t really love us!”

“Of course I love you,” said Draco.

“Cruel, unfeeling boy...!”

“Mother, please... please...”

“You said you forgave us!”

“I... I *do*... There’s nothing... nothing to forgive,” he told her, until she stopped crying. She sat up, hiccupping, on the bed. Her hair was the prettiest thing in the world.

“Do you feel remorse?” she asked.

“Why must you always ask me that?”

“I want you to be loved again, someday. I am beginning to doubt that you ever will be.”

Draco went to the window, opened it, and stuck his head out. It was a long way down. When he was calmer, he sat back and shut the window.

“I’m doing everything that I can,” he said.

“No one will love you if you don’t feel—”

“Yes, I *know*, mother!”

She looked as if she was about to burst into tears again.

“I’m sorry,” said Draco. “I didn’t mean to snap at you like that. Please forgive me.”

“I will always forgive you,” said his mother. “Because I love you.”

“I love you too,” said Draco, understanding exactly what she was getting at. When he next looked up, she had disappeared.

Draco sat on the floor next to his bed and tried not to think.

It was getting harder to do that. To turn off his thoughts. Something was thawing, and as the numbness ebbed away, pain came to replace it. He knew it was because of Harry. Or Ginny. Both, probably. And Hermione had healed the sting on his face so quickly that afternoon, as if she didn't want him to be in pain a second longer than he had to be...

Returning to Hogwarts had been about as unpleasant as he had thought it would be. Around Potter, people kept their distance. But they more than made up for it in the moments when Draco was alone.

The first day, Draco had come out of Arithmancy only to be immediately accosted by the Gryffindor seeker, Steven Hodges, who had dragged him into the nearest bathroom and kicked the shit out of him. Draco had tried to hit back, but he was no match for him, not when he couldn't use magic. Draco had been so sure Harry would come and stop it, but he hadn't. He forgot about Draco, as if Draco were a chore he hadn't fancied doing, anyway.

Which, of course, he was.

When Steven left, Draco's mother appeared. Draco was curled up in a ball on the floor. Steven had been careful only to hit him in places covered by his robes.

"Get up," said his mother. "Stop crying."

Draco obeyed. He washed his face in cold water and fixed his hair.

"You mustn't appear to be pathetic. You can't tell anyone about this," she told him. "They will find out eventually, and admire you for your stoicism."

"That's stupid," said Draco.

"Do you want him to love you?"

"Yes."

“Then you mustn’t be pathetic.”

“It’s not pathetic to get help,” said Draco, thinking of Harry. Of how much better Harry had seemed since he told Draco about what really happened in the Forbidden Forest with Voldemort, since he opened up about his childhood. Harry needed help, and Harry was the least pathetic person he knew.

But then he doubted himself. Maybe things were pathetic for Draco, that were right for Harry.

“You’ve had so much help already, Draco,” said his mother. “You’ve run out of help.”

Again, he wondered that she could say such things, things that he would never have thought his mother would think. But as always, she was right. Draco had grown up rich and privileged. The more he learned about Harry, the more he realised all the ways in which Harry was better than him. Other people overcame things. Draco, meanwhile had had everything a person could need to succeed, and he had fucked it right up. He’d used up his advantages. He was through.

So he went to wait outside the Arithmancy classroom, and he said nothing about the beating when Harry finally remembered him. Nor did he mention the countless other times it happened. Steven Hodges appeared to have memorised his lesson schedule. In all likelihood, his grades were suffering for how thoroughly he hounded Draco.

Nor was it just Steven. Admittedly, Steven was the most *committed* of Draco’s tormentors, but others found ways to harm him, from pinching him and tripping him, to whispering horrible things to him in the corridors, so quietly that Harry could pretend not to hear them. Most days, Steven and his friends found at least one opportunity to beat Draco. It didn’t help that Harry wasn’t exactly punctual. Draco didn’t know *what* he got up to on the walks between classes, but he often thought, as Steven cast cutting hexes at his back, that Harry must practically saunter backwards.

Or maybe it just felt like a long time because he was in so much pain. Certainly Steven was always gone by the time Harry arrived.

The more they hurt him, the more he found himself touching Harry. The fact was, Draco missed his mother. He missed being loved. When he put his head in Harry's lap and Harry stroked his hair, he could close his eyes and imagine a world where he hadn't made his mistakes yet, and everything was still possible.

Harry touched him too, in small ways. Draco knew it was just sexual, but he pretended to himself that it wasn't. It didn't really matter if it was sexual or not, anyway, because he knew Harry would never act on it. Draco remembered the way Harry had looked when told to touch his Mark. He would always remember; it was printed on him, somewhere deep. However much Harry wanted to fuck him, he wouldn't actually stoop so low.

So Draco leant into the physical intimacy, because it was safe, and because it was good.

There was a knock on door.

"Come in," said Draco.

Harry opened it, spotted him, and came to sit beside him on the floor. He sat so close that they touched all along their bodies, from shoulders to legs. Draco instantly leant into him, as if he had been waiting for Harry to arrive. Which, if he was honest with himself, he had been.

"I really like it when you talk to me," said Harry.

Draco had been too upset earlier. He had spoken thoughtlessly, carelessly, he might have spoiled everything. But now he was cool. He thought through options. He had just settled on something reasonable and gracious, when he turned to look at Harry.

He hadn't realised that Harry was looking at him, too. Their faces were so close. Harry seemed concerned, and Draco realised, as if he was suddenly

understanding some complicated problem whose logic had evaded him for years, that he was in love with him.

He looked at Harry's compassionate green eyes, and thought, *I love you.*

Harry reached forward and brushed a strand of hair out of Draco's face. The gentleness of the gesture made Draco feel like a child again. He closed his eyes and wondered if Harry would kiss him. He often thought Harry was about to, but he never did.

Today was no exception. Harry turned his head away, putting an arm around Draco's curled up body and pulling him close. It hurt. It usually did when Harry touched him, because of all the bruises and cuts and burns, but it never hurt enough for Draco to let himself flinch, because if he flinched, Harry would stop.

"Come out to Hogsmeade with us," said Harry. "Ginny and Hermione and some others are going. I wrote to Madam Rosmerta already to ask if you could come and she said it was fine. But if you don't want to go there, we'll go to the Hog's Head. Wherever. Just come."

Draco laughed softly.

"I have to come, Potter. You've ordered me to."

Harry leant his head into Draco's and laughed too, a quiet, breathy laugh that went tingling through Draco.

"Sorry," said Harry. "You don't have to. But will you?"

"Yeah."

Harry squeezed him. Draco bit his lip to stop himself from crying out in pain.

"Brilliant. Ginny will be thrilled, she thinks you're going to wingman her into Blaise's bed."

"No one needs a wingman to end up there."

Harry sprang up and took Draco's hands. Draco let him pull him to his feet, but Harry didn't let go when they were standing. He just drew Draco close and hugged him.

"I'm sorry your day's been shit," he whispered into Draco's hair. "I won't mention it again, I promise, but I'm still sorry."

"I'm keeping you to that promise, Potter," said Draco. Harry released him and smiled.

"Come on, put on your shoes. I need a drink."

If someone had told Draco a year ago that Ginny Weasley would someday be the light of his life, he would have laughed in their face. Well— he would have looked at them with harrowed eyes and expressed a mild but listless disbelief. He hadn't really been up for laughing, a year ago. That was one of the reasons Ginny was so great.

When she first joined their library sessions (and Merlin, did Hermione rule that friend group with an iron grip), Draco had instantly known what she needed. It was so obvious.

His mother's lessons had forced him to think about other people in terms of what he could give them, rather than what *they* could give *him*, and ever since, he found himself coolly diagnosing everyone's needs. It was rather fun, in fact. He thought he might be quite good at it.

Harry had needed someone to listen to him— actually *listen*, to what he said, not what he stood for, or what he ought or used to think. He needed to be certain he wasn't boring anyone. Essentially, he needed someone who could find him fascinating without worshipping him. Conveniently, Draco had been fascinated by Harry his whole life, and the more he learned, the more his fascination grew.

McGonagall—she didn't trust Draco. She wanted Harry to be safe and happy. Only Draco's actions would win her round, so there was no point in talking to her. It was similar with Hermione. He listened to her, of course,

but that was more for his benefit than hers. Draco suspected he and Hermione would have a lot to talk about if she ever actually trusted him. But that would take time, and his mother had warned him about trying to shorten the timescale of trust.

“It’s a fundamentally untrustworthy thing to attempt,” she said.

So Draco gave Hermione space. The progress he made with her had been quite accidental. It was when Harry went to the loo one afternoon, leaving Draco, Ginny and Hermione alone in the library.

“He looks better,” said Ginny. Hermione nodded.

“He’s not drunk,” she said.

Draco made a noise of surprise.

“What?” asked Hermione, sharply.

“Nothing, it’s just—he only gets drunk when he’s lonely,” said Draco.

“That’s not true. He got wasted around me and Ron all the time this summer,” she said. Draco bit his lip.

“What?” said Hermione again.

“It’s not my place,” said Draco.

“Well, it’s mine,” said Ginny. “And I reckon you’re right, Draco. He’s saying Harry feels lonely around you and Ron now that you guys are together.”

Hermione’s eyes widened.

“Has Harry said that?” she asked Ginny. Draco was glad she hadn’t asked him, because Harry *had* said that, although not in so many words.

“*I’m happy for them,*” he said, often. “*I’m really happy for them.*” But then he mentioned the time in Grimmauld Place during the war, when he noticed

they had fallen asleep holding hands, and he had felt a yawning, endless loneliness. *“But they deserve to be happy, you know?”* he said quickly.

“You do, too,” Draco told him.

“I bet they’ll have kids,” said Harry. *“They’ll be such great parents.”*

“You’re not built for loneliness, you know. You draw people in.”

Harry had simply shrugged and changed the subject.

“He barely spoke to me except to say he wanted to end things,” said Ginny. “Ask Draco, he’s the only one Harry tells things to.”

“He talks to you?” asked Hermione.

“You’re Harry’s only family,” said Draco. “And now you’re going to start your own, without him. Or at least, I imagine that’s how I would feel, if I were him.”

“He—we’re not—he’ll *always* be family!”

“Everyone always leaves Harry,” shrugged Draco. “Anyway, the point is, he doesn’t drink much at Hogwarts. It’s the holidays that’ll be interesting.”

Hermione was staring at him as if he had just announced he was intending to run for Minister for Magic.

“Look,” he said, unnerved, “I shouldn’t have said anything. Ignore me.”

“He drinks less when he’s around *you*,” said Hermione. “That’s why he stopped spiralling after your trial. You make him less lonely.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Draco, horrified by this interpretation, which would now haunt him hopefully for months. “No, really—I think he just doesn’t want to get drunk around me and make me—”

Well, there was a sentence he couldn’t finish, and he was just trying to find a way to correct himself when Harry returned.

But after that, Hermione was notably warmer towards him, although he still didn't get the impression she trusted him.

Ten minutes after this incident, Ginny leant into his ear and said,

“Would you mind, if he made you?”

Draco knew she understood the blush that bloomed across his cheeks as clearly as if he had spoken.

Although, of course, it was more complicated than that. There was a reason Draco hadn't kissed Harry, despite the fact that he knew Harry wouldn't pull away. Once Harry had had him, Draco would become loathsome to him again. However sweet the fruit, it couldn't possibly be worth such a bitter aftertaste.

Draco almost thought he could have explained all this to Ginny, if he were ever alone with her. They understood each other. When he was little he used to pretend he had siblings, a wonderful, huge family, always bickering and teasing each other. Ginny felt like the imaginary sister he had dreamt of in his childhood.

And that, he knew, was what she needed most. Although George had lived, from what Draco understood he was no longer the same. Ginny needed to be teased and to tease. She needed someone to satisfy the ache left behind by Fred Weasley's death.

They had compatible needs. Perhaps that was all friendship was. An emotional transaction. Draco suspected Ginny wouldn't need him for long, and then their tenuous contract would end. But that would be the case with all Draco's relationships, from now on. He might briefly satisfy a person's needs, but there wouldn't be any sense in keeping him around after that. Love was what sealed things into permanence, and as his mother so often reminded him, he would not soon find it.

Ginny Weasley looked more than usually pretty, and she kept anxiously twirling her hair around her fingers. They were settled in a corner booth at The Three Broomsticks. Draco had quietly excused himself when they first

arrived and apologised to Madam Rosmerta. He knew what an awkward position Harry had put her in, and he explained to her that if she would like, he would happily arrange for Harry to order him to stay home whenever they came here. But Madam Rosmerta had been gracious and kind, and Draco rejoined the others feeling lighter.

“Stop worrying,” he told Ginny, now. “You’re Blaise’s type.”

“What’s his type?” asked Harry.

“Pale, bratty, good at quidditch,” said Draco.

“Hmm, that’s Harry’s type, too,” said Ginny. Harry glared at her. “What?”

“Ginny, he’s desperate to be rescued from that conversation with Millicent Bulstrode. He only ever smiles that much when he’s bored. Go save him, and he’ll be so grateful that there’s no saying *what* he’ll let you do to him.”

“Draco!” said Harry.

“Don’t be such a prude,” said Ginny. “Okay, I’m going. Wish me luck!”

“You’re gorgeous,” Draco called after her as she left.

“Are you bi?” Harry asked him, pretending to be casual.

“Nope,” said Draco. “Just men for me.”

Across the table, Hermione caught his eye and grinned. Draco blinked. Was Hermione sharing a joke with him? Apparently so, although it didn’t last long.

“Well, I’m going back,” she said. “Are you two coming?”

“Might have another drink,” said Harry. “What do you want to do, Draco?”

“I’ll stay.”

Hermione kissed Harry goodbye, nodded at Draco, and left them alone in their secluded booth.

11. Chapter 11

Draco turned to look at Harry. Harry turned to look at Draco.

“How did it go with Madam Rosmerta?” asked Harry. They leant back into the booth, their heads lolling towards each other.

“It went well,” said Draco. Harry smiled.

“That’s good.”

“Yeah.”

Harry reached out and brushed Draco’s hair out of his face, but when he had done that, he left his hand on Draco’s jaw.

“Your hair’s always falling into your eyes,” he said, leaning a little closer. Draco could smell the alcohol on his breath. He was perfectly sober, himself (no one who had seen how Lucius Malfoy drank last year could fancy a lager afterwards), and felt keenly aware that it was on him to make sure things didn’t escalate.

“Order me to cut it off, if it bothers you,” he said, in an attempt to remind Harry of his position, of why they were sitting together in the first place, of the tattoo on Draco’s arm.

“It doesn’t bother me,” said Harry quietly. “It doesn’t bother me at all.”

Their lips were so close now that if Draco didn’t Do The Right Thing they were going to kiss, as sure as falling off a cliff.

Draco had never been good at Doing The Right Thing.

The kiss was not at all the way Draco had imagined it would be, when he was fifteen. It was gentle and questing. It was soft, punctuated by the sharpness of Harry’s stubble. It was a little clumsy, because Harry was so

drunk. He hadn't even drunk that much, but Draco supposed his tolerance had gone down since the summer.

Draco was taking advantage. He felt awful.

Kissing Draco Malfoy was setting Harry's brain on fire. Every part of him wanted more. His eyes wanted to pull away so that he could stare at Draco. His hands wanted to undress Draco and slide all over him. His head wanted to check Draco was okay. Something in his chest wanted Draco to talk to him, talk to him properly, as he had for a brief moment that afternoon—without censoring himself, without worrying, as if Draco trusted him.

But ultimately Harry's mouth was getting exactly what it wanted, and demanded to spend, oh, maybe another two years just kissing Draco, to figure out all the different ways it could be done.

It was not to be. Draco pulled away.

"You're very drunk," he said.

"Shit," said Harry, trying to replay how the kiss had happened. Had he ordered Draco to do it? He didn't think he had. And Draco did not look as if he had been forced into anything. But consent was complicated. Even if a teacher was twenty-one, it was wrong for him to hook up with his eighteen-year-old student, because of the power dynamics. And Harry had a whole lot more power over Draco than a teacher would.

Draco licked his lips.

"I'm—I'm getting you a glass of water, okay? And maybe some food," he said. He looked anxious.

"I'm sorry," said Harry. "I shouldn't have done that."

Far from reassuring Draco, Harry's words seemed to make him unhappier.

“Don’t—” Draco broke off and slipped away.

When Draco returned to the table with a pint glass of water and some chips (which, bizarrely, Madam Rosmerta had told him were on the house), Steven Hodges was sitting next to Harry.

Draco froze.

“Chips!” exclaimed Harry. “Draco, you’re a life saver.” He took the chips from Draco.

“Here, drink the water, too,” said Draco, still staring at Steven Hodges.

“*Imperio*,” said Steven Hodges suddenly, and Harry’s eyes went blank. Draco lunged at Steven, but Steven was quicker. “Harry, tell Draco to stand still and shut up.”

“Stand still and shut up, Draco,” said Harry. The compulsion to obey hit Draco almost physically. Harry could throw off the imperius when sober, but clearly not when drunk.

“See, I thought it wasn’t fair that Harry should get all the fun,” said Steven. “Harry, say that Draco has to obey me just like he obeys you, until you say otherwise.”

Harry repeated the order. Cold sweat broke out on Draco’s scalp.

“Let’s see if it worked,” said Steven. “Draco, say ‘I’m a piece of shit and everyone wishes I were dead.’”

The compulsion was just as strong as if Harry had said it, but he couldn’t speak because Harry had told him to shut up. If he opened his mouth, the pain began, but he closed it, it was also triggered. Steven suddenly understood.

“Tell him he can talk, Harry.”

“You can talk,” said Harry.

“I’m a piece of shit and everyone wishes I were dead,” said Draco, gratefully. The pain ebbed away and Steven Hodges laughed.

“Oh, we’re going to have such fun! Right. Draco, you are not to tell anyone about anything that just happened. You cannot tell them in words, writing, or gesture. When I say the word, you must obliviate Harry. When he asks why you did it, you must tell him he told you to do it because he drunkenly embarrassed himself. If he mentions it further, you must become hostile and aggressive until he stops.”

“Steven—”

“Don’t complain.”

And Draco couldn’t.

“Obliviate him now.”

Draco pointed his wand at Harry and wiped the last five minutes from his mind. Steven lifted his imperius at the same time. Harry blinked, spotted Draco’s wand, and frowned.

“Draco, what the fuck?”

“You asked me to obliviate you,” said Draco.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you said you embarrassed yourself,” said Draco, adding the “you said” in an effort to spare Harry’s feelings. It was too cruel to tell Harry that *Draco* thought he’d embarrassed himself. Knowing Harry, he’d assume the worst.

Harry looked confused.

“But I still remember...” he stopped and glanced at Steven. Draco knew what he wasn’t saying. “*Kissing you.*” Harry was trying to think what could

possibly embarrass him more than having kissed Draco Malfoy.

“Don’t look at me,” said Steven. “I didn’t hear it.”

“Something I *said*...?”

He looked utterly perplexed, and then something dawned in his eyes.

“Shit,” he said.

“Well, it was nice talking to you both,” said Steven. “See you around, Draco.”

Draco didn’t answer him. Steven left, sniggering.

“Draco. Please. Please tell me.”

Draco noted that the “please” negated the order of the “tell me.” But Steven’s previous command took hold.

“Fucking drop it, Potter,” he snapped.

Harry looked as if he’d hit him.

“Right. I probably deserve that,” he said.

They walked back to Hogwarts. Harry kept stealing glances at Draco, and several times tried to apologise for whatever it was he had done. Draco snarled at him to shut the fuck up each time, until Harry started protesting that there was no need for him to be such a dick about it. By the time they got back to their room, neither of them was speaking to each other.

The next morning, Draco remembered that he was supposed to get his wand checked that day. He had really hoped that if he could avoid talking about last night, he and Harry could go back to normal, but he would need Harry to explain about the memory charm to the Defence Against The Dark Arts teacher.

He made Harry a cup a of tea and waited for him to wake up.

Harry came out of his room looking a little the worse for wear.

“Hey,” he said, not meeting Draco’s eye.

“I made you tea,” said Draco.

Harry moaned.

“You’re honestly the best,” he said. Draco tried to tamp down his heart, which was behaving like a naughty child.

“I need you to tell Professor Woodruffe about the memory charm. It broke the terms of my parole.”

“Oh, shit,” said Harry. “You should have mentioned, last night. I’m sure I wouldn’t have made you do it, if I’d realised.”

Draco grit his teeth, trying to avoid the compulsion, but the pain burnt through his veins. He knew it would build up to a full blown crucio within seconds.

“Don’t be so pathetic, Potter. Just sort out the fucking mess you made.”

Harry’s expression hardened.

“You know, whatever I did, there’s no need for you to be such a twat about it. I’m obviously sorry to have disgusted you so much or whatever, you don’t need to act like—”

“Like what, Potter?”

“Like we’re fifteen again.”

They were away from the topic of last night. Draco felt the compulsion ebb away.

“Is your tea the right temperature?” he asked softly. “I made it a while ago.”

Harry scowled and cast a warming charm.

“I don’t understand you,” he said.

Draco knew he shouldn’t, but he grabbed Harry’s hand, turned it open, and kissed his palm. When he looked up, he tried to express with his eyes what he couldn’t with words.

Something was lost in translation. But Harry did not immediately pull his hand away.

“What do you *want*, Draco?” he asked.

Draco thought through options. Harry waited patiently.

There wasn’t a good answer.

“Breakfast,” he said, finally. Harry gave him that disappointed look that always reminded Draco so much of his father, and they went to the Great Hall.

Harry accompanied him to Professor Woodruffe after breakfast, and explained the memory charm.

“Please don’t get him trouble over it,” he begged. “It was completely my fault.”

Although clearly uneasy, Woodruffe agreed not to officially log it.

“I will be reporting it to the headmistress, however,” she said. “And I find your behaviour in all this extremely suspect, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco was too unhappy to answer.

Then came the moment he had dreaded all day. Arithmancy finished. The students poured out, and Draco waited outside the classroom.

Steven strolled down the corridor, whistling. Usually he brought friends, but he was alone today.

“Hello, Draco,” he said. “Go to the bathroom.”

Draco obeyed. He stood by the sink and looked at his reflection. He thought how strange it was that he could once have been so loved, so prized.

“If I’ve done this right, this ought to hurt quite a bit,” said Steven. “Grow wings and fly, Draco.”

Clever, thought Draco, in the last fraction of a second before the pain took over. Now he doesn’t have to do anything to torture me. He can just sit back and watch the show.

And what a show it must have been. Draco’s shoulder blades strained to break out of his back, as if they might sprout into wings if dislocated. Pain coursed through him, brutal, beating, stinging, burning. It built and built; he had lost all control.

“Stop,” said Steven, lazily. “You don’t have to.”

The pain stopped at once, like the flipping of a switch. Draco was on the floor. He took a tentative breath. His lungs didn’t hurt any more, but he was shaky. It wasn’t as bad as it had been after he was separated from Harry without explicit permission by the floo powder.

“Well, that worked even better than expected,” said Steven. “Only you screamed like a girl. Next time, you have to be quiet.”

“You’re insane,” said Draco. “You do realise you’re going to be caught, don’t you? You cast an unforgivable curse at the Saviour of the Wizarding World!”

Steven shrugged.

“He doesn’t remember it. And you can’t tell him.”

“If you think I’m keeping your little secret once the bond is broken, you’re even stupider than you look.”

Steven smiled widely.

“Draco! Do you really think I don’t have an exit strategy?” He shook his head and laughed. “I got the idea from your aunt, actually. See, one day, I’m going to give you an order you can’t obey, and just let the pain... go on a bit. You know what that does to people’s minds, don’t you?”

Draco’s mouth had gone dry. He did know. He knew all too well, had seen the effects of the cruciatus first hand, last year. Regular short doses broke the body. A longer dose broke the mind. Draco was going to suffer both.

“I forbid you to lie to me,” said Steven suddenly. “Tell me, can you think of any loopholes in my plan?”

“No,” said Draco grimly.

“Good,” said Steven. “Well, that’s all for today. Obviously, you can’t tell anyone about any of this. See you tomorrow!”

Once he was gone, Draco’s mother appeared.

“Get up,” she said. “Don’t be pathetic.”

Draco looked at her and realised her face was slightly... off. It was the visual equivalent of when you forgot a word, and kept thinking of other words instead, that were similar, but wrong. Her face was like that: similar, but wrong.

Her hair was still right, though. Long, silvery, lovely. He watched it shimmer in the dim bathroom light and remembered coming out to her. It had been an accident: he was thirteen, and so infatuated with Theo Nott he thought he would die from it. Theo, of course, was not only not interested, but outright insulted. Draco had burst into tears in his mother’s arms that Christmas and confessed everything.

If she was surprised to learn he was gay, she did not show it.

“My sweet boy,” she said, stroking his hair. “He isn’t worth it. I know it hurts now, but one day, you’ll find a boy who will love you the way you

deserve to be loved.”

“What if I don’t,” wept Draco.

“You will, my sweet, you will.”

His father, too, had been supportive. They both chose to react to his heartbreak rather than his sexuality. Draco had proved a terrible disappointment to his parents, but only for the things he did or didn’t do, never for who he inherently was.

He still remembered the overwhelming relief he felt when she held him and promised his anguish wouldn’t last forever.

“Harry will be coming soon,” hissed his mother now, or at least, it looked like his mother, more or less. “Do you want him to know how wretched you are?”

“I thought pity led to love,” said Draco, trying to stand. His bones felt weak.

“You have to deserve the pity for that to work,” said his mother.

“I do deserve pity,” said Draco.

“Oh, really? Have you repented, then?”

“I can’t. You know I can’t. Don’t tell me no one will ever love me, I’m well aware.”

“Your hair’s in a state.”

Draco combed through it with his fingers. It still looked awful.

“Go wait in the corridor,” said his mother.

“He’s going to torture me into insanity, mother. Is there really any point in all this scheming? It all leads to the same place, doesn’t it? St Mungos?”

“Malfoys die with dignity,” she said. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

There, she had a point. Draco had always had a self-pitying streak, and it was not an aspect of his personality he was keen to indulge. He went to stand in the corridor.

“Hey!” said Harry. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No problem,” said Draco.

“You okay? You seem a bit...”

Draco cut him off.

“I’m fine,” he said.

12. Chapter 12

Harry had only one theory about what he had done that was so awful he had asked to be obliviated. He must have told Draco about his feelings. Draco probably hadn't returned them, and then freaked out about what it would mean for him if Harry felt humiliated, and Harry had offered to have his memory wiped to set Draco at ease.

What he couldn't work out was why Draco was such a dick about it whenever it came up. Nor why Draco seemed, if anything, more affectionate than before. He was constantly finding ways to lean against Harry, to touch him. The other day, Harry could have sworn Draco kissed his neck while hugging him goodnight.

They hadn't talked about the kiss in the pub. It had been weeks now. Harry felt far too guilty to bring it up, and he suspected that it would have made Draco deeply uncomfortable if he had.

Hermione didn't have an answer either. He knew she was inclined to think that there was something more sinister afoot. The theory she had put forward was that Draco had said something awful about the war, and then obliviated Harry so that Harry wouldn't hate him for it.

"He wouldn't do that!"

"Wouldn't he?"

They were walking over to collect Draco from Arithmancy. It was one of the few times when Harry could discuss him behind his back.

"Hermione, come on, you have to admit he's changed."

"I agree that he's changed. I think he really cares about you. I also think he might have got scared if he thought he had lost your good opinion, obliviated you in a panic, and then been too frightened to tell you what happened."

Harry frowned. That actually made more sense than his own theory. Basically, both theories were shit. He wished Draco would just tell him, but he was sick of fighting about it.

Draco wasn't outside the classroom.

"That's odd," he said. "I'll just check the loo."

He went to the nearest bathroom and opened the door.

"Drac—"

He stopped.

Steven Hodges had Draco up against the wall and was kissing him passionately.

"Uh," said Harry.

Steven broke away from Draco's mouth.

"Do you need him right now, or can I have fifteen minutes?" he said. Draco started to say something and Steven rolled his eyes, muttering, "Shut up, you," fondly.

"Uh, no, that's—yeah, um, just. Draco, uh, go back to the room when you're... done," said Harry.

"Thanks, Harry," said Steven. He turned back to Draco. "Now, Draco... get on your knees and open that smart mouth wide..."

Harry couldn't flee the bathroom fast enough.

Draco got to his knees and opened his mouth. He was so angry he couldn't think, except for the part of him that was replaying Harry's devastated expression when he had seen them.

“Oh, relax,” said Steven. “I don’t want your disgusting mouth anywhere near my dick. You can speak again, by the way.”

“You kissed me.”

“I didn’t realise he’d be here so soon. He’s usually late.”

“He’s always on time when he comes with Hermione.”

“Aren’t you a font of knowledge? I had to do something, or he would have wondered what we were doing in here together. The blow job thing was just to humiliate you. Did it work?”

Draco couldn’t lie. It wasn’t allowed.

“Yes.”

“I’m quite good at this,” reflected Steven.

“You should have been a Death Eater. You’d have loved it.”

Steven sent a burning hex at Draco’s chest.

“Fuck!”

“No, see, Death Eaters hurt *innocent* people, whereas I hurt *you*.”

“You know the funny thing about doing evil, Steven? It fucks you up for good. You might not feel it yet, but you will.”

Steven looked at him contemplatively.

“That’s interesting,” he said. “You think what I’m doing is evil, but I think what I’m doing is just. I wonder— do you think you deserve *better* than this?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know,” said Draco. It was difficult to tell the truth when you didn’t know what it was.

“Hm. Come with me to the Gryffindor common room. You’re writing my potions essay.”

“But Harry said—”

“—To come back when you were done. He didn’t specify further.”

“Everyone will see,” said Draco.

“Yes,” said Steven. “You’re madly in love with me. I’m just using you. That’s what I’ll be telling people, anyway. You have to go along with it.”

“I really never thought I’d hate anyone more than the Dark Lord,” said Draco, almost in wonder.

“You are a piece of work, Draco. Do you have any idea how many lives he ruined? All I’m doing is redressing the wrong of your bizarre mistrial.”

Harry waited anxiously in their sitting room for over an hour before he went to check the map. He kept getting up, then forcing himself to sit down, to trust Draco. He was just fooling around with Steven Hodges in the bathroom. Which was fine. Terrible, obviously—oh, God, would he ever forget the sight of Draco obediently dropping to his knees without a word of complaint; Merlin, Harry *hated* Steven Hodges—but fine. Draco wasn’t *his*. He could date. That was probably, you know, healthy.

Harry tried to clean his broom but he was too angry and kept getting polish on the sofa. The fact was, he *did* think of Draco as his. His friend, if nothing else. How could Draco not have told him about this?

But then, Draco never told him anything, did he? Harry had spilled his soul out to Draco, lulled into confidence by his pitiless, curious grey eyes, by the way he always asked the right questions, and never seemed shocked.

“In a cupboard?” Draco repeated, when Harry first told him about the Dursleys. It was a few weeks after they’d arrived at Hogwarts.

Harry had never told anyone about the Dursleys. Not really. Ron knew a bit, but had never asked him anything. Not because he didn't care, of course Harry knew he cared. He probably just thought Harry would talk about it when he was ready. But it was such a... downer. Harry never brought it up. The only way he would ever have told anyone was if they asked; if they seemed genuinely interested.

And Draco always seemed interested.

"Yeah," said Harry. "At first. Until my Hogwarts letters started coming. Then they gave me Dudley's second bedroom."

Draco looked down at his hands and hesitated for a long time. Harry started to feel itchy and stupid.

"I'm trying to think which question I want to ask first," said Draco, after a while. "It's difficult, because there are too many."

"I don't know, it's not that interesting."

"I think it's interesting. Were you close with Dudley?"

"Close? I hated him almost as much as I hated you!"

Draco laughed softly.

"So much?"

"Yeah, well, you and I weren't the best of friends when we were twelve."

"No," said Draco. "Do you think of Dudley ever, nowadays?"

"He tried to make amends," said Harry, frowning. "Brought me a cup of tea."

"Tea is such a communicative drink," said Draco. "But do you think of him, now?"

"No," said Harry. "I think of my aunt."

“What was she like?”

And so Harry had told him. He told him how people seemed to love him only splashes across his life, how he always waited for it to dry up. It had been so unexpected that anyone liked him at all, when he got to Hogwarts, and then the school had continually turned against him - in first year when he lost all those house points, in second year, when everyone thought he was the heir of Slytherin, in fourth year, when everyone thought he was an attention-seeking git, in fifth year, when everyone thought he was crazy. People liked him in the gaps between hating him.

“But if they like you for long enough, the percentages will change,” said Draco. “Then they will have disliked you in the gaps between loving you.”

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “Winston Churchill wasn’t re-elected after WWII.”

“What?”

Harry explained. Winston Churchill had guided Britain through the war. But once they had won, although people were grateful to him, no one wanted him anymore. He was as irrelevant in peace as he had been necessary in war.

“There are different forms of power,” said Draco. “Different ways of being wanted. Do you even want to be The Chosen One all your life?”

“No, of course not. I just—” he sighed. “I just want things to be constant.”

“Hermione’s constant,” said Draco.

“Hermione’s going to get married,” said Harry flatly. “And buy a nice house with Ron, and I’ll visit on Sundays for lunch.”

“Time changes everything,” said Draco. “Even your insecurities.”

“I’m not insecure.”

“Everyone’s insecure.”

“What are you insecure about?” asked Harry, knowing it was no use.

“So the Weasleys are the closest thing you have to family?” asked Draco, as if Harry hadn’t spoken.

“Yeah. But it’s not the same, you know. It doesn’t feel unconditional.”

“Why not?”

It was those “why” questions that made Harry feel so much better after each conversation with Draco. He always left feeling as if he had processed something that had been souring and rotting inside him. As if he had put something away, tidied up the clutter in his heart. Draco put his soul in order.

And now Draco was fucking Steven Hodges. Which was *fine*. It was *fine*.

Harry couldn’t stand it any longer. He checked the map, feeling as if he was in sixth year again.

Draco was no longer in the bathroom, of course. He was in the Gryffindor common room. Harry stood to go fetch him, and forced himself to sit again.

Sure, Draco flirted with him. Draco was physically affectionate. Draco touched him as if Harry was important to him. Draco hadn’t seemed to dislike that kiss in the pub. But that didn’t mean Draco fancied him, and Harry had no right to be angry or upset or hurt.

None of this stopped Harry from *feeling* angry and upset and hurt. He was conscious of an incredibly entitled feeling of rage simmering just beneath the surface of his thoughts. He had rescued Draco, not only from the Fiendfyre, but from Azkaban. He had saved the Wizarding World. He wanted Draco, and he *deserved to get him*.

Shut up, he told himself, disgusted.

It didn’t change how he felt.

What was Draco even *doing* in the Gryffindor common room? He kept replaying the patronising, dominating way Steven Hodges had spoken to Draco, as if he owned him (if anyone owned Draco, it was Harry— *no, stop*, no one owned Draco, that was a horrible thought—). He wondered if Draco was dating Steven, or if they were just fucking. He wasn't sure what would be worse. He wondered if Draco was sleeping with anyone else.

He was perfectly within his rights to sleep with anyone he wanted, of course. That was *fine. FINE*. But Harry had told him to come back to the room; the whole point of the Prisoner's Bond was that Harry was supposed to keep an eye on Draco, and how was he supposed to do that if Draco was off having inter-house orgies, *fuck*.

It was late by the time Draco returned, and Harry had been so angry for so long that he was ready to hit his own head against a wall.

When Draco got back to their room, Harry was wearing pyjamas and looked furious.

"What the fuck were you doing in the Gryffindor common room all that time?"

"I—how did you know I was there?"

"I told you to come back when you were done blowing him, not to go on to fuck half the castle!"

Draco pressed his lips together. He knew that if he were actually up to no good, Harry would take a lot of the blame— agreeing to be bonded to him had taken a lot of faith on Harry's behalf. It was reasonable to be angry, if Draco started evading the minimal rules Harry asked him to follow.

But that wasn't what Harry was angry about— he was jealous, and Draco didn't have any patience for it. He was powerless to set Harry at ease, in any case. Steven had given him a long list of commands that prevented him from straying in any way from Steven's version of events.

“I’m sorry. Steven had a liberal interpretation of what you meant by ‘when you’re done.’”

“So... so, what, you’re dating Steven now?”

Draco laughed.

“No.”

“So you’re just shagging?”

And suddenly, glorious and golden like the snitch, Draco saw a loophole.

“Does that bother you? You could just order me to stop seeing him.”

Harry opened his mouth and shut it again.

“I—”

“Say the word, Harry,” said Draco, leaning forward. “*Tell me I can’t go near him.*”

Harry gave him a look of cold dislike.

“You can be with whoever you like, Malfoy. I don’t care.”

Draco sank onto the sofa. Harry paused with his hand on the door to his room.

“But don’t take the piss,” he said. “I rescued you from Azkaban, you know.”

Draco’s mother appeared as Harry slammed the door.

“Don’t you start,” said Draco, and went to bed.

13. Chapter 13

It was harder for them to be friendly, after that. Draco was as pleasant as possible whenever he could be without breaking one of Steven's rules—which increased daily. There were many subjects which, if they came up in conversation with Harry, Draco had to respond to with hostility.

“Is Harry fucking you, by the way?” asked Steven, idly. Draco was panting on the floor of the bathroom.

“No.”

“Yeah, I never did believe all the sex slave rumours. Who would want to fuck you?”

“How's your sex life going, Steven? Lot of people into psychopaths, these days?”

Steven kicked him hard in the ribs.

“I've thought about ordering you to be polite to me, but I think that would take the fun out of it, don't you?” He kicked him so hard in the spine that spots of white flashed in front of Draco's eyes. “Did that hurt?”

“Yes.”

“What's your relationship with Harry like, anyway?”

“Complicated.”

Steven kicked him again. His boots were thick and rather pointy.

“Are you friends?”

“Sort of.”

“Do you like him?”

“Yes.”

“Oh!” Steven laughed. “Oh—do you *like* him?”

Draco grit his teeth and thought about not answering—but it was useless. He’d end up answering eventually.

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“A lot.”

“Do you love him?”

Draco didn’t respond.

“Answer me,” said Steven.

Draco felt the pain well up. He tried to remember that he wouldn’t always be in this bathroom with Steven Hodges. In an hour, he would be in the library, sharing jokes with Ginny Weasley. That was the sort of thing that made a life worth living. He didn’t let himself think about Harry, because physical pain was quite enough without the twisting in his heart that came whenever he remembered Harry’s current coldness towards him.

“Yes,” he said.

“Do you *really*?” Steven sounded amazed.

“Yes.”

“That’s rather romantic, actually. And gives me something else to work with.” Steven cast a few stinging hexes at Draco, thinking. “You know, I don’t like Harry, myself. It’s not easy being the seeker to replace him. I have an idea... yes. Draco, you must go looking through his room. Bring me anything you find that we could leak to the press.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“No, I’m not doing that.”

Steven’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“All right, try not to. Only I’m giving you a time limit. You must have done it by dinner tonight. That’ll make it easier for the bond to know when to punish you. I wonder how long your mind will last? Your body’s already starting to show the strain. Don’t think I haven’t noticed how shaky your hands are.”

It was true. Draco’s hands had a near constant tremor. Ginny had remarked on it several times. Harry had asked him about it, too, but questions about pain or discomfort were one of the things Steven had instructed him to respond to with belligerence, so he had practically bitten Harry’s head off. Harry had never brought it up again. Their wonderful, fragile friendship was fast withering, now that Draco was constantly being a dick, and also apparently sleeping with someone else. Not that Harry would have allowed himself to treat Draco differently because of *that*. In fact, a few days after the bathroom blow job fake out, Harry had awkwardly told Draco that if he ever wanted more alone time with Steven, or anyone else, he had only to ask.

“Oh, thanks *awfully*, Master! You *are* good to me,” said Draco, because anything to do with Steven had to be answered with rudeness.

“I don’t know what the fuck’s got into you, Malfoy. Or maybe, I don’t why you were briefly not a twat. Because one of these versions of you is a front, and I honestly have no clue what to think.”

Draco stared at him, wide eyed, and *willed* him to know. But Harry wasn’t as patient with him as he used to be.

Occasionally, there were evenings when none of the forbidden subjects came up, and Draco was able to be pleasant for hours at a time. But of course, Harry didn’t know what to avoid, and acted as if he was treading on eggshells.

Still, when Draco brought him cups of tea and asked him thoughtful questions about his day, Harry sometimes looked at him as if—

Draco wasn't sure what that look meant.

Harry didn't touch him anymore, and he froze up when Draco leant into him. This was one of Draco's greatest sources of grief. It was dreadful to be tortured every day, dreadful to have someone puppeteering his choices, of course. But losing Harry's gentle, affectionate touches left Draco with an echoing loneliness that ached as physically as any of his wounds.

He tried to resist going into Harry's bedroom. In the end, it wasn't the pain that made him give in— that wouldn't have started until dinner, after all—but the fact not doing it would effectively kill him. However miserable Draco was, he had always had a firm grip on one thing: survival. So, as always, he did the selfish thing that would keep him alive. He wondered what Harry would have done, in this scenario. Probably he would have defeated Steven Hodges in some cinematic showdown in the Great Hall, before slaying a few rogue basilisks and catching the bloody snitch.

There was one loophole Draco could see, however. Steven had ordered him to look for dirt on Harry, but he had said nothing about how *thorough* Draco had to be. Harry was out flying with Ginny. They had invited him, but he had declined, implying that he was too traumatised from the last time he had been on a broom, escaping the Fiendfyre, to get back on one now. In reality, he was too injured to fly. He didn't trust his muscles anymore. They gave way unpredictably. It made him feel ancient.

Harry hadn't locked his bedroom, which made something like hope prickling painfully in Draco's chest. Harry trusted him not to go through his things. Falsely, as it turned out, but still.

He glanced quickly around the room without touching anything. Bed, wardrobe, carpet, nothing to sell to the Prophet, job done. To be safe, he decided to peek inside Harry's trunk. If Steven found out how half-heartedly he had carried out his task, he would be sure to give Draco more detailed instructions next time.

He flung open the chest and rolled his eyes. No wonder Potter was so rumpled all the time. Why didn't he hang his shirts in the wardrobe like a normal person—

There was a piece of paper with Draco's name on it. Before he could stop himself, he had plucked it from a pile of wrinkled shirts.

Ways In Which Draco Malfoy Is A Fucking Awful Person, it read. And then there was a list.

Draco sank to his knees as he read. The list appeared to be roughly chronological, beginning with Draco having apparently insulted Hagrid in Madam Malkin's when they were eleven (which Draco could not remember) and ending with *67. He tried to drag me out of the Room of Requirement and turn me over to fucking Voldemort!!*

It wasn't the incidents Draco remembered that disturbed him, however. Of course he knew Harry hated him for... for the *badges*, for calling Hermione a mudblood, for catching the DA, for almost poisoning Ron Weasley, for almost killing Katie Bell, for letting Death Eaters into the school, and countless other awful things Draco had done. He was intimately familiar with the cringing, soul-shrinking shame of those acts.

No, what was terrible was the numbers on the list that he hadn't remembered or noticed. Had he really said, in second year, that he hoped Hermione would be killed by the heir of Slytherin? Had he really laughed about Cedric's death, in fourth year? And things he said about Harry's parents, tiny ways he had made Harry feel inferior and bad for *years*—so many ways in which he was, just as the list said, a fucking awful person.

The list was written in Harry's small, cramped handwriting, and yet the parchment was crowded with Draco's sins. And (Draco's heart plummeted) how many more lists like this might there be in existence? What might Hermione's list about Draco look like? *Ginny's*?

He was in his bedroom now. He wasn't sure when he had left Harry's, or if he had shut the trunk, or put the list back. He sat on his window seat, looking out at the grounds.

What was remorse, anyway? Could you feel remorse if you didn't take responsibility? And how could he take responsibility when he still blamed his parents for so much?

No, it wasn't remorse he was feeling, he decided. It was just... it was just something so painful he couldn't stand it.

Harry's voice came in from the sitting room. He sounded annoyed.

"Malfoy? Have you been in my room?" A pause, while Harry went to investigate. Draco didn't stir from the window. He knew that Harry would soon be adding 68. *He went nosing through my things like a fucking creep.* What difference did it make?

Harry came into his room. He was holding the list in his hand.

"Draco," he said. He hadn't called him that in days. Draco could not move.

Harry sat on the floor by Draco's dangling leg. He rested his face against Draco's calf.

"Draco, I wrote that ages ago. When we were first bonded. I was confused, you were behaving so differently, I just..."

He buried his face in Draco's knee. Draco let one of his hands drop to Harry's head.

"Shh," he said softly.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not upset that you wrote it, Harry."

"But you are upset."

"Yes," said Draco.

"What were you looking for, anyway?"

“A book,” said Draco, as he had been ordered. He tensed, worried that Harry would ask more questions, and Draco would be forced to answer cruelly. But Harry only wrapped an arm around Draco’s leg, hugging it to his chest.

“I don’t think you’re a bad person,” said Harry.

The window pane was cold on Draco’s forehead.

“What about lately?” he asked. Harry hesitated.

“I... I wish you would talk to me more. I don’t know what’s going on with you; it feels like you’re hiding things; I don’t know you well enough to know what you mean and what you don’t. But how you were at Grimmauld Place? How you are with Ginny and Hermione? I really, really like that person.”

Draco could feel the ball of emotion gathering in his throat.

“I like that person, too,” he said.

“I miss that Draco, when he’s not around,” said Harry. “Because he’s sort of one of my closest friends.”

Draco tried to think what to say. It suddenly seemed as if there were a million viable options, or there would have been if it weren’t for Steven’s commands. How could he have wasted so many weeks, months, thinking things he now longed to say, and not saying them?

“Whatever you’re thinking, just say it,” said Harry.

“I can’t,” said Draco. Harry looked up when he heard the tears in his voice. He came to sit on the window sill next to Draco and pulled him close. It had been so long since he had done that. Draco swallowed and blinked until the rising swell of tears had been pushed back. He felt closer to Harry than he had since they kissed in the pub, a month ago. He had to try to express himself, at least a little. “I’m...sorry...” he began, saying each word slowly,

as if he were walking across black ice, "...when...I...upset...you. I'm... always...sorry."

No pain followed. He breathed a sigh into Harry's neck.

"I know you are," said Harry. "You always find a way to show me. I understand what an unsolicited cup of tea means in the language of Draco Malfoy."

Draco laughed delicately, trying not to dislodge more tears.

"But," Harry went on. "You've been making me feel like shit a lot, lately."

"I know."

"Are you going to stop?"

"I..." he wanted to say 'can't'. 'I can't stop.' But he knew that would break a command, and by the time Harry had figured out what had happened, Draco's brains would already have been scrambled. So he pressed a gentle kiss to Harry's jawline, instead. "No," he said.

"Why not?"

"Please don't ask."

Harry tilted his neck slightly so that Draco could have better access to it. Draco kissed it slowly, reverently.

"Draco..."

"Mhmm?"

"What's going on between you and Steven Hodges?"

At once, Draco felt the compulsion seize him, and he wanted to scream at the *unfairness* of it, he felt like a man dying of thirst who had just had a glass of life-giving water snatched from him, but there was nothing to be done. He closed his eyes.

“Merlin, Potter, whose dick do you want to suck, his or mine?”

Harry sat up as quickly as if Draco had punched him.

“For fuck’s sake, Malfoy. You’re such a child.”

Draco shrugged, watching him intently. *Change the subject*, he begged silently. *Say something I can respond to as me.*

“It’s a perfectly fair question for me to ask when you’re practically licking your way up my neck. What’s going on with you and Steven?”

“I told you. If it bothers you, just *order me not to see him anymore*.”

“You *know* I would never do that! Just because you like being told what to do sexually—”

Draco made a high, embarrassed sound.

“Oh, please,” said Harry. “I saw you in that bathroom, obeying his every command, you fucking loved it.”

“Fuck you!” Draco surged to his feet. The hostility was all his, this time, fuelled by rage, not by Steven’s orders. “How *dare*—you have no clue—Fuck you—I can’t even—”

“Draco,” said Harry, his eyes widening in alarm. “I’m sorry, hey, Draco—”

“Get out!” screamed Draco. “*Get out!*”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“*Leave me alone!*”

Harry all but ran out of the room, closing the door gently behind him

14. Chapter 14

Harry knocked on his door the next morning.

“Come in,” said Draco. He wasn’t angry anymore, at least, no more angry than he always was, at everything.

Harry came in.

“Unsolicited cup of tea?” he said, holding out the mug. Draco’s heart fluttered.

“I accept it,” he said. Harry smiled and brought it to him. “I think you’re owed one, too.”

“I’ll accept it,” said Harry.

“Can we not talk about it anymore?”

Harry chewed his lip.

“We’ll have to, eventually.”

“Please, Harry.”

Harry reached out and touched Draco’s hair. It always looked a bit mad when he woke up.

“You look good like this,” he said. “All sleepy and unpolished.”

Draco practically vibrated with pleasure. He knew the smile on his face was probably smug as shit.

“Hmm, but when do I not look good?” he said.

“Fair,” laughed Harry. “Totally fair. You even looked fit at your trial, did you know that?”

“I did *not*.”

“You did. It was very annoying.”

“Is that why you agreed to take me?” asked Draco, trying to sound casual. But Harry saw through him.

“Draco... no,” he said, seriously. “No, I agreed... for a lot of reasons. You looking like *you* was barely part of the equation.”

Draco raised his eyebrows.

“But it *was* part of the equation.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, well, isn’t that why you agreed to come with me? Because I’m so deviously good looking?”

Draco laughed, but then he focused on Harry, wiped the smile from his face.

“No,” he said. “No, that’s just been a bonus.”

Harry coughed and stood up.

“Right, well, we’d better, um, go to breakfast.”

“Thank you. For the tea. My mother used to say, ‘Don’t be with someone who’s too proud to apologise first.’”

Harry stared at him, and Draco realised what he had just said.

“I mean—obviously, we’re not... together,” he added, kicking himself.

“You don’t usually speak about your mother in the past tense,” said Harry.

“Yeah, well, she wouldn’t say something like that, now,” said Draco darkly. Harry looked as if wanted to ask more, so Draco gave him a tight smile and

got out of bed. “Clear out, I want to change.”

“So you didn’t find anything,” said Steven.

“No. And he caught me. I can’t go in again, he’ll get suspicious.”

Steven frowned at him.

“You can’t lie to me,” he said.

“I know I can’t,” said Draco, irritated. “I’m telling you the truth. Anyway, there’s really not any dirt on him. He’s squeaky clean. Trust me, I was annoyed to discover that, myself.”

“Hmm,” said Steven, tapping his fingers on the edge of the sink. He hadn’t hurt Draco yet, which made them both wary. “Still...”

He turned to Draco.

“Tell me: is there anything he’s ashamed of?”

The words came pouring out of Draco, as if he had been dosed with Veritaserum:

“He wants to sleep with me.”

“What?”

“He’s attracted to me. It’s the only thing he has to be ashamed of.”

“Hang on, hang on—you’re in love with him, and he’s attracted to you, but you haven’t slept together?”

“He wouldn’t,” said Draco. “He would never actually sleep with me; I’m a Death Eater, remember?”

Steven cocked his head.

“Is that painful for you? The fact that you disgust him?”

“Yes,” said Draco, through gritted teeth.

“You don’t look so well, these days. How’s your eyesight?”

“Failing.”

“Temperature regulation?”

“I’m cold all the time.”

“It happens quicker than I’d thought,” reflected Steven. “Well, as a treat for you being so helpful, I’m not going to hurt you today. Say thank you.”

“Thank you,” said Draco. He barely had give in to the compulsion. He was sincerely grateful. It was harder and harder to tolerate the cruciatus curse, because his entire body was so sensitive.

“Keep an eye out for *The Prophet* in the next few days, Draco. There’s going to be such a nice little piece about the pair of you.”

Draco thought of Harry’s list, and wrote the next number in his head: 69. *He sold me out to the Prophet, AGAIN.*

Things were better between them for the next few days. Draco still snapped at him several times, but there was something about him having told him that he always felt sorry afterwards, that made it easier to tolerate. Even though Harry knew he shouldn’t have to. That old anger was still in him, that sense that he had sacrificed his whole childhood to save the fucking world, and deserved something in exchange. Was it really so much to ask Draco to just be nice to him?

But then, Draco would bring him an unsolicited cup of tea—tea had taken on a rather loaded meaning in their rooms, now that it could be seen as a tacit apology—and Harry found it difficult to stay angry.

It was also difficult not to notice that there was something seriously wrong with Draco's hands. They trembled so hard when he brought Harry his apology teas that half the time, Draco ended up spilling the boiling liquid on himself, dropping the mug, and having to start again. But when Harry suggested he go to Madam Pomfrey, Draco snarled "Why, worried I won't give you a decent handjob if I've got the tremors? Fuck off," and Harry dropped it.

He went to Madam Pomfrey himself, and described the symptoms—the trembling hands, the way Draco had started knocking clumsily into things, reduced appetite.

"It's hard to tell without seeing him, of course, but it sounds like spell damage," she told him. "Make him come to me."

Harry didn't want to *make* Draco do anything, but spell damage was serious. And what if it was from the bond? It was relatively new magic. He decided that if he couldn't talk Draco into going of his own accord in the next week, he would order him to.

A few days after Draco found the list, Steven Hodges was waiting by him when Harry came to collect him after Arithmancy.

"Hey," said Steven. "Mind if I have Draco for the free period?"

Harry glanced at Draco. There was something about the way Steven asked if he could "have" him that made his blood boil, but Draco looked placid.

"That's up to him," said Harry tersely. "Draco, do you want to go with him?"

"Yes," said Draco. His voice was measured, but certain.

"Well... fine, then."

"Thanks, Harry, you're a pal," said Steven. "Come on, Draco."

"Wait," said Harry. Steven and Draco looked at him. "What's going on with you two? Are you dating, or..."

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Potter,” said Draco, immediately, but Steven interrupted him.

“Be polite, Draco.”

And... Draco obeyed him. Fucking just... muttered “sorry” and shut his mouth. Steven tutted.

“You haven’t told him?” he asked Draco.

“No,” said Draco.

“Told me what?”

“Go on, Draco,” said Steven.

“That I’m in love with him,” said Draco, calmly. “I’m in love with Steven.”

“Oh,” said Harry.

“Can you give us a minute?” Steven asked Draco. Draco turned stiffly and walked a little way down the corridor. Steven lowered his voice.

“Look, it’s complicated,” he said. “I felt sorry for him, you know?”

“So, what, you’re pity-shagging him?”

“He knows I don’t feel the same way. He doesn’t care. You can ask him. He’s absolutely gagging for it.”

Harry glared at Steven.

“You’re taking advantage of him. You’re leading him on.”

“What’s your problem? Are you jealous, or something? Because if you want him, I’ll back off.”

Harry could feel the heat rising in his face.

“He’s not a fucking... thing to be passed around, you creep! Merlin, what does Draco *see* in you?”

Steven looked concerned.

“I’m serious, Harry. If you want him, you can have him.”

“I don’t want him!” shouted Harry. Draco looked up. Their eyes met, and then Draco’s gaze slid blandly away to look at the floor. Harry took a step towards him, then stopped himself. Draco was in love with Steven, after all. He didn’t have a right to be offended if Harry didn’t fancy him, when *he* didn’t fancy *Harry*.

“I just meant,” he said, trying to keep his temper under control, “that I don’t get to make those kinds of decisions for him. If he wants to be with you, he’s a fucking idiot, but that’s his right.”

Steven laughed.

“Okay, then. Well, he does. So, if you don’t mind, he’s promised to do some extremely dirty things to me with his mouth, and I—”

Harry’s wand was at Steven’s throat in an instant.

“You’re trying to embarrass him. Fucking try that again and I’ll kill you.”

Steven’s Adam’s apple bobbed.

“Do you understand me?” said Harry. Steven nodded his head, his cocky arrogance gone. Harry lowered his wand. “If you do *anything* to him, you’ll have me to answer to. Now fuck off. And treat him with some fucking respect.”

He stepped away from Steven and saw Draco watching him. He had a strange, dark look in his eyes. But before Harry could figure it out, he had turned away.

15. Chapter 15

Notes for the Chapter:

Slightly short chapter today! Things will really kick off tomorrow

Harry was still practically sparking with fury by the time he found Ginny and Hermione in the library.

“What’s wrong?” asked Hermione, as he sat down. “Where’s Draco?”

“With Steven Hodges,” spat Harry. “Who he’s in *love* with, apparently.”

“What?” asked Hermione, shocked.

“Really, you eighth years are out of the loop,” said Ginny. “Everyone knows that. Steven practically put out an advert in the papers.”

Harry dropped his bag.

“You *knew* that Draco was in love with him?”

“I mean, he’s *not*,” said Ginny, sounding bored. “But I knew that Steven says he is, yeah.”

“What do you mean, he’s not? He *told* me, Ginny!”

Ginny sighed.

“Yeah, he told me that too, when I asked him. But that’s not who he’s in love with, Harry.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Ginny shook her head.

“I can’t say more. And it’s not like he’s told me anything explicitly. But I don’t want to betray his trust.”

“Well, I don’t care about his trust,” said Hermione. “He’s in love with *you*, Harry, anyone with eyes can see it.”

Harry struggled for a moment to find words.

“That’s—you’re—he *told* me he’s in love with Steven!”

“Yes, that makes sense,” said Hermione, composedly.

“How does it *make sense*?”

“Because he thinks he can’t have you, so he’s trying to get over you by telling himself he’s in love with someone else.”

Harry slumped in his chair, bowled over by Hermione’s argument. He wanted to believe it so badly that it was very difficult to know whether it was actually, rationally convincing or not.

“I... Ginny?” he asked.

“I’m not ratting out Draco’s feelings,” said Ginny. “But he’s definitely not in love with Steven Hodges. Whenever Steven’s name comes up, Draco closes up completely. I don’t think he even likes him very much.”

“That also makes sense,” said Hermione, nodding. “Could be a form of insecurity. He doesn’t think he deserves someone who would treat him nicely, that sort of thing.”

“He’s not in love with me,” said Harry faintly. Hermione made an exasperated sound.

“Oh, honestly, Harry! He stares at you as if you’re the most wonderful thing he’s ever seen. He takes every opportunity he can to touch you, and don’t think we can’t tell when the two of you are playing footsie under the table. You said he listened to you talk for hours at time in Grimmauld Place with unflagging interest, he’s been quietly weaning you off alcohol for months, he’s done everything he can to ingratiate himself with your friends, and he obliviated you when he thought he’d said something to make you dislike him. It’s pretty clear what his feelings are.”

“We don’t know why he obliviated me,” countered Harry. “And he doesn’t stare at me like that. And he’s nice to you two because he’s trying to be a better person.”

“What I want to know,” said Ginny, “is how *you* feel about *him*?”

Harry ran his hands through his hair.

“Okay, say he does fancy me, or whatever,” said Harry. “That’s just that, that Oslo Syndrome thing.”

“Stockholm syndrome,” corrected Hermione.

“That. Where prisoners fall for their captors because they’re so grateful they’re not being treated worse.”

Hermione and Ginny fell silent. Then:

“I don’t think so,” said Ginny, at the same time as Hermione said,

“You might be right.”

“It’s not Stockholm Syndrome!” said Ginny. “You don’t understand Draco at all, Hermione, if that’s what you think!”

“Harry’s making a good point. Draco has so few options. He’s probably so overwhelmed by gratitude for Harry that it’s difficult for him to know *what* he really feels.”

“Harry’s never treated him like a prisoner,” protested Ginny.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Harry. “Because he *is*.”

“He likes you because he can help you,” she said. “And Ron told me what you said at his trial; you called him *redeemable*, can’t you see what that must have meant to him? It’s so much deeper than gratitude. Anyway...” she paused. “I shouldn’t say this. He’ll kill me.”

“I won’t tell him,” said Harry, quickly.

Ginny seemed to be warring with herself. Harry kept his eyes fixed on her, trying to draw her out. Finally, she sighed.

“Okay. Do not tell him I told you this, but... he’s fancied for you ages. Way before the war. He told me once he used to think about you when he wanked in fifth year.”

“He told you that?”

Fifth year. How was that even possible?

“Well, okay, I surmised,” said Ginny. “I ask him questions, and if he blushes, that means yes.”

“So all those times when you two were giggling and whispering to each other, you were talking about him wanking over me?”

Ginny rolled her eyes.

“Please. That was one conversation. The rest of the time, we were swapping stories about Blaise. You know, Draco has actually taught me a thing or two about—”

“Stop! I don’t want to know!”

“Fine. Just don’t write off his feelings as a syndrome.”

“I still think it’s more complicated than that,” said Hermione. “And I certainly don’t think Harry can tell Draco he loves him until after the bond is broken.”

“I don’t love him,” said Harry, automatically.

“Oh, all right then,” sighed Hermione. “Wait until after the bond is broken to tell him that you think about him all the time, and want to hold his hand and stroke his pretty blonde hair and keep him safe for all eternity. Is that better?”

“A bit,” said Harry, sulkily. “Yeah.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Ginny. “About Steven?”

“Nothing,” said Harry, surprised. “I’m not going to tell Draco what to do. And Hermione’s right, he and I can’t start anything until the end of the year. I have too much power over him for it to be healthy.”

“But right now he thinks you don’t like him!”

“Look, for all I know, you two are wrong, and he really *is* in love with someone else. If I come on to him, as his *captor*, it’s going to make him so fucking uncomfortable. I mean, the reason he started being all dickish again was that I kissed him in the pub.”

“You *what*?” said Hermione.

“It was an accident! I was drunk, and he was... he was just *looking* at me, with his fucking... eyes...!”

“And then he was a dick to you because he thought you didn’t mean it, and it hurt his feelings!” said Ginny.

“Maybe, maybe not!” said Harry. “Either way, I’m not risking it. It’s not fair to him.”

“That’s stupid,” said Ginny.

“You’re stupid,” said Harry.

“All right,” said Hermione, placatingly. “Let’s just let things rest for a few days. We’re still trying to convince Draco to go to Madam Pomfrey’s, aren’t we? One thing at a time. Once that’s sorted, we can work on the marriage.”

“I’m not marrying him!”

Ginny and Hermione sniggered, and Harry gave up.

Draco was curiously cold to Harry when he returned to their room that evening, although he was still just as nasty as ever when Harry asked about

Steven. Harry decided not to read too much into it. Hermione was right. Whatever was going on with Draco's health was more important than Harry's feelings for him (which Harry was uncomfortably aware were definitely not dissimilar to love).

But everything changed the next day at breakfast.

16. Chapter 16

HARRY POTTER'S SECRET SHAME

He defeated the Dark Lord, but can he defeat his dark desires?

This summer, the Boy Who Lived made headlines when he came to the defence of teen Death Eater Draco Malfoy, and, in a twist for the ages, agreed to undergo the newly developed Prisoner's Bond to keep the attractive young Slytherin out of Azkaban. Sources close to Potter have now revealed that his reasons may not have been as honourable as they seemed... "Potter is desperately attracted to me," said Draco Malfoy, in an exclusive interview with The Prophet. "It disgusts him, but he can't help himself." Draco Malfoy, 18, was found guilty of dozens of truly heinous crimes, including using the cruciatus curse to torture children as young as eleven. "I think that's part of the appeal," said an anonymous source, close to both Potter and Malfoy. "Malfoy is filthy, and Potter likes that..."

There was a ringing in Harry's ears. His face was so hot it felt itchy. Draco sat next to him, watching him closely.

"Oh, Harry...!" said Hermione, but Harry ignored her. Everyone was staring at him, but he only had eyes for Draco.

"Draco," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "Tell the truth: did you talk to the Prophet?"

"Yes," said Draco.

It was as if something blew up in Harry's brain. He seized Malfoy by the collar and dragged him out of his seat. It was spectacularly easy to do; Malfoy was as light and frail as an old man. Keeping one hand fisted in his robes, Harry marched out of the Great Hall. Malfoy had no choice but to follow.

"Harry!"

It was Ginny. She raced to keep up with them as they strode along the corridors.

“He admitted it,” snarled Harry. “He went to the papers.”

“Don’t hurt him!” said Ginny.

“Am I hurting you, Malfoy?”

Malfoy shook his head.

“Wait till you’ve calmed down to talk to him,” said Ginny.

“No! I’m talking to him *now*, because he fucking betrayed me!”

“Don’t hurt him!” repeated Ginny.

“I’m not going to fucking hurt him! He hurt *me*!”

“I know,” said Ginny, miserably. “I’m disappointed, too.”

Malfoy looked as if he would cry. Harry was *not* going to feel sorry for him. He was *not*. He dragged Malfoy away from Ginny, into their sitting room. Ginny did not follow them.

When the door was shut, he pushed Malfoy against the wall, so hard that Malfoy’s head banged against it with a thud.

“I *believed* in you!” howled Harry.

The worst of it was that Harry was *still* attracted to him, even now, even though it had all been fake, and Malfoy was still the cruel, conniving bastard who had tortured him for almost his whole life.

“Why did you do that? Tell the truth!”

Malfoy opened his mouth to speak, and then something like dread flashed in his eyes. He shut his mouth again. Within seconds, the bond’s punishment came into effect. Harry was still holding him, could feel how

every muscle in Malfoy's body tensed and tightened, but even if he hadn't been, he would have known from Malfoy's excruciating shriek of agony.

"Stop! You don't have to tell me!"

Malfoy sagged in Harry's arms. Harry stepped away, because if he didn't they would just have been hugging. Without Harry holding him up, Malfoy crumpled to the floor.

"Merlin," he said shakily. "It hurts so much more when *you* do it."

"Why won't you tell me?"

Malfoy only shook his head. He had one trembling, long-fingered hand held to his chest. Harry wouldn't pity him, he *wouldn't*, pitying him was what had got him caught in this trap in the first place!

"That's what you were doing in my room, isn't it?"

Malfoy nodded. Harry gave a hollow laugh.

"You told me you weren't upset that I'd written the list. You were just disappointed you hadn't found anything on me, weren't you?"

Malfoy shook his head. Harry resisted the urge to order him to tell the truth.

"Why, then?"

"I was upset because I had *done those things!*" said Malfoy. "All the things on the list—I couldn't even remember doing most of them... how much *else* have I done...?"

Suddenly Draco's earlier words registered. "It hurts so much more when *you* do it." Harry stared at Draco, whose head had drooped so that it rested on the edge of the fireplace. He thought of the resigned way Draco had answered him at the breakfast table, of the look of heartbreak in his eyes when Ginny said she was disappointed in him, of his refusal to answer a simple question, choosing to be tortured instead. It didn't add up.

“Why would you do any of this?” asked Harry, but he wasn’t talking to Draco anymore. “It doesn’t benefit you. It’s not like you come off well in that article.”

Draco lifted his head to look at him. Harry’s stomach turned at the fear he saw in his eyes.

“If I tell you to do anything that will prompt the cruciatus, warn me right away,” he said. “I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

Draco clenched his teeth, but didn’t say anything.

“You’re hiding something,” said Harry.

“Please,” said Draco, but it wasn’t clear what he was pleading for. He looked so frightened.

“You can’t tell me why you did it.”

“Please,” said Draco again.

Harry conjured a glass of water and handed it to Draco, who accepted it warily.

“Thank you,” he said.

The fact was, Harry *did* believe in Draco. He trusted him. Or, it was more that he couldn’t bring himself to *distrust* him. He had been angry on instinct, because his anger was always so close to the surface these days, because Draco had oscillated constantly between behaving like he used to, and behaving like someone Harry could easily fall head over heels in love with. But when Harry took a step back, his anger couldn’t latch onto Draco anymore, because it was so obvious that something was wrong. Draco wouldn’t betray him—not if he could help it. Draco hadn’t betrayed him in the Manor, when his life depended on it. Draco didn’t *want* to hurt him.

“I’m sorry I was so angry,” said Harry.

“Don’t apologise. I’m the one who sold you out to the *Prophet*. Again, might I add. I saw that number on the list, from fourth year.”

“I scared you.”

“You’ve always scared me. Even when we were kids. You’re fucking terrifying. ”

“I don’t want to hurt you. But I’ve got to try something. If it’s going to trigger the cruciatus—”

Draco shrank away, but he steeled his expression.

“Do it,” he said.

Harry took a deep breath.

“Answer me only in lies. What’s your name?”

Draco’s eyes were wide, hopeful, frightened.

“Harry Potter,” he said.

“Good,” said Harry. “Why did you go to the *Prophet*?”

“Because...” Draco looked utterly terrified. “Because... I... hate you...” He glanced up at Harry, who smiled reassuringly. “Because I wanted to hurt you...Because...”

Harry suddenly realised what Draco reminded him of: Dobby, in second year, trying to give Harry clues when he knew one slip of the tongue would cause him untold suffering.

“Because...” Draco looked at him with an expression that was almost pleading, “Because *I wanted to...*”

“You didn’t want to,” breathed Harry.

“Please,” said Draco. It sounded like a warning.

“Someone’s making you. But how have they hacked into the bond?”

“Please don’t ask me anything.”

“I have to talk to Hermione. I’m so sorry I was angry. That was unfair of me, you didn’t deserve it.”

“What the hell are you talking about, deserving? As if I want to get what I deserve, I’m miserable enough as it is...!”

Harry crouched down beside him and leant his forehead into Draco’s.

“Draco...” he said. Draco made a soft, surprised sound, that made Harry want to kiss him to death. But someone was blackmailing Draco, or whatever it was that had him panicking so badly that he preferred to take the cruciatus than tell Harry anything about it, and Harry had to find out what. “Stay here, okay? I have to find Hermione. I’ll be back as soon as I can. We’re going to sort this out. I promise.”

“You’re not angry with me,” said Draco, blankly.

“I shouldn’t have been angry in the first place. I should have had faith in you. I’m sorry.”

“*Faith...*?”

“I’ll be back soon. We need to talk to Hermione, and you’re not in a state come with me. Are you okay? You’re not in pain?”

“Fuck off, Potter,” said Draco nastily, something clicked in Harry’s head. The sudden shift in Draco’s behaviour over the last few weeks, the way he would go from friendly to awful in unpredictable spurts... Harry had thought it was because of that stupid kiss, but what if it was because of something else? Something *dating* from around the same time as the kiss in the pub, after which Draco had started behaving so erratically?

“The memory charm,” he said.

“Don’t say anything else,” said Draco, and he looked terrified. “Please, Harry—”

“I won’t.” He pressed his lips to Draco’s forehead. “I’ll be back soon. We’re going to fix this. I promise.” He stood to leave, caught sight of Draco, and had to swoop back down to kiss his forehead again. He was filled with an affection so fierce it made him want to pick Draco up and *squeeze* him.

There wasn’t time. He gave Draco one last, lingering look, and hurried to away to find Hermione.

Steven came in within a minute of Harry leaving. Draco was sure he had been waiting outside the door.

“Did you tell him about your interview with the *Prophet*?”

“Yes,” said Draco, getting unsteadily to his feet. He still felt woozy from the cruciatus, which had been much stronger than it ever was with Steven, even though it had lasted only a few seconds.

“What did he say?”

“He was angry.”

“Did he punish you?”

“He’s not like that.”

Steven looked disappointed. Draco knew that Steven loved the idea of Harry hurting Draco—the physical combining with the emotional; it was just the sort of thing Steven delighted in.

“What else did he say?”

“He wanted to know why I did it.”

“What did you say?”

Draco had been hoping to avoid this. They were approaching dangerous territory: if Steven found out how much Harry had figured out, he would just kill Draco and be done with it.

“I couldn’t say anything,” he answered. “He told me to tell the truth.”

He knew in an instant that that was enough. Steven’s clever eyes roved over him.

“He knows someone’s controlling you.”

Draco didn’t say anything. Steven had long ago made it a rule that Draco had to answer his questions, but this didn’t seem to be one.

“Answer me!” said Steven, his voice pitching desperately. Draco took a step backwards. He knew how this went.

Voldemort had never been more violent than when he was desperate.

“He suspects,” said Draco, and thank God, that seemed to count as the truth.

“Right,” said Steven, to himself. “Right.”

Draco could see the wheels turning, could see Steven deciding to torture him into insanity now, even though it was earlier than planned.

“He’ll know it was foul play if he comes back and I’m damaged,” said Draco. “The only way you can get away with this is if it looks as if I broke one of his rules out of stupidity or stubbornness.”

Steven cast him an appraising look.

“You’re clever,” he said. “It’s a pity you fucked up your life so badly.”

Draco laughed.

“Two things we agree on. We’re practically friends,” he said.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Draco closed his mouth. Steven looked intensely rattled. He ran his hands through his hair, took several deep breaths, then smiled.

“Yes. Shut up. Don’t say a word, don’t write a word, don’t communicate in any way through gestures, until I’ve had a chance to figure this out. Pretend you’re sulking, or something.”

Or something. Draco managed to hide his soaring hope. There was a lot of room for interpretation in the phrase “or something.”

“I am going to break you, Draco,” said Steven. “Don’t think Harry’s going to save you. He won’t.”

With that, he left the room.

Draco smiled. People had a tendency to underestimate Harry Potter, and it never worked out for them.

17. Chapter 17

“Of course!” said Hermione. “Someone must have hacked the bond and then forced him to obliviate you! But how? Can Draco tell you?”

“I’m scared of asking him too much,” said Harry. “I think he’s got a lot of orders he has to follow, and I don’t want to make him break one by accident.”

“There’s only one way to find out what happened. We have to take him to the ministry and have the bond removed.”

Harry nodded. They were almost back at his room anyway— they would take Draco to McGonagall and convince her to let them floo to the ministry.

Draco was lounging on the sofa. He glanced up at Harry, looking rather bored.

“We’re going to the ministry to get the bond removed,” said Harry. “I think that’s the only way to fix this.”

Draco stood and came to join them by the door, but he didn’t say anything. They hastened together to the Headmistress’ office. Harry knew the password—McGonagall had given it to him in case there was any “trouble with Mr. Malfoy.”

She let them in after the first knock.

“We need to go to the ministry,” said Harry. “There’s something wrong with the bond.”

“Mr. Potter, please calm yourself. What do you mean, there’s something wrong?”

“We think someone’s hacked into it, and is using it to control Draco.”

Professor McGonagall cast a disbelieving look at Draco.

“Has this anything to do with the article regarding you and Mr. Malfoy in the Prophet today?”

“Yes! Exactly! Someone made Draco—”

But Professor McGonagall cut him off.

“Mr. Malfoy, it seems you have been taking advantage of Mr. Potter’s generosity. I suppose you thought this plan would free you both from the bond and from Azkaban, but I assure you it will not work as you intended.”

Draco didn’t say anything. He didn’t even react.

“Professor, he’s not pretending,” said Harry. “He’s been ill—show her your hand, Draco.”

Draco obediently held out a hand. It shook violently.

“Mr. Malfoy, explain what’s going on,” said Professor McGonagall.

Once more, Draco acted as if he hadn’t heard her.

“Draco?” prodded Harry. “Draco, come on, answer her.”

“Harry, no—” said Hermione, a split second too late. Draco’s face twisted up in silent anguish as the cruciatus curse hit him.

“You don’t have to!” said Harry. “Sorry, sorry, sorry...!”

Draco sank low into his chair, his face pale and clammy with sweat. It hurt to look at him.

“Someone must have got to him while you were gone, Harry, and ordered him not to communicate,” said Hermione. “Professor, I know we all have reason not to trust Draco, but he’s in danger. We have to remove the bond, and soon.”

Professor McGonagall looked shaken. Harry didn't blame her. He was having a hard time not pulling Draco onto his lap and holding him, himself — Draco looked so worn out, so tired, as if he was on the verge of giving up entirely.

“Yes, very well,” said Professor McGonagall. “I will come with you, to explain.”

They stood and went to the fireplace. Harry took Draco's hand. Draco looked at him impassively.

“We'll go together, yeah?”

Draco didn't so much as blink. He simply looked away. But he didn't remove his hand from Harry's.

“The Ministry of Magic!” said Harry. He squeezed Draco's hand. Draco did not squeeze back. There was a flash of green light, and when they stepped forward, they were at the Ministry.

Harry was very grateful that Professor McGonagall was with them. She seemed to know the Ministry intimately, and swept them to Kingsley Shacklebolt's office. After a brief discussion with his secretary, they were shown in, and Professor McGonagall explained the situation.

Kingsley gave Draco an appraising look.

“That boy's not well,” he said. Draco did not respond.

“Can you remove it?” asked Harry.

Kingsley nodded and cast a quick binding charm, tying Draco to his chair. When Harry made a sound of protest (Draco looked idly at the ropes, but said nothing), Kingsley looked apologetic.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I don't believe Malfoy is dangerous, but I would be liable for any harm he caused if it turned out I was wrong. Malfoy, please hold out your arm.”

Draco didn't move. Harry very gently took his left arm and pulled back the sleeve, revealing pale skin littered in half-healed cuts and bruises. Horrified, Harry pushed the sleeve back further. The wounds continued.

"What's happened to him?" asked Kingsley.

"I don't know," said Harry, feeling sick.

Draco's eyes flicked to his face. He looked almost bored, but Harry could tell from the tenseness of his muscles that he was scared.

"We can ask him after we've removed the bond," said Harry. "I don't want to risk anything."

Kingsley nodded, and Draco seemed to relax a fraction. He watched with baited breath as Harry placed his hand on the Mark and stroked it reassuringly with his thumb.

"Captivus liberatum," said Kingsley. Harry felt the magic wash over him. He knew it had worked because Draco turned to him and spoke quickly.

"I don't want to have to say everything twice. I'd like to be interrogated under Veritaserum."

"Good thinking," said Kingsley. He went to a locked cabinet at the back of his office and fetched a small glass vial. He knelt by Draco and administered three drops on Draco's tongue. Draco's eyes went blank and emotionless.

"Perhaps it would be best if you questioned him, Harry," said Kingsley. Draco turned to look at Harry.

"Draco," said Harry, "what happened the night you obliviated me?"

Draco had two reasons for requesting Veritaserum. The first he had explained to Kingsley: as long as he was telling the truth, he preferred to be believed. The second was that Veritaserum made truth-telling less painful. His father had dosed him with it, once or twice, when he was at his most desperate.

“I went to get Harry a glass of water,” he was saying, mechanically. He was barely conscious of the words. The potion drew them out of him like poison. “When I returned, Steven Hodges was with him.”

“I fucking knew it!” said Harry.

“Mr. Potter!” chided Professor McGonagall.

Distantly, Draco thought of the way Harry had gently stroked his Mark, as if it was just ordinary skin. He hadn’t hesitated, either. He had touched Draco quickly and easily, as if Draco were clean.

“Steven placed Harry under the imperius,” he continued. “Harry wasn’t able to fight it off because he’d had too much to drink. Steven ordered him to order me to obey Steven. Harry did so. I was now bound to obey Steven as well as Harry.”

“Oh, Draco,” said Hermione.

Draco continued in a monotone, describing Steven’s plan to torture him into insanity, the myriad rules he had inflicted on Draco, the way he had been obliged to pretend he was in love with him.

“Why did he have you tell the *Daily Prophet* lies about Harry?” asked Kingsley. Draco’s brain flickered awake. He didn’t want to embarrass Harry by admitting that what he had told the *Prophet* was true.

“He hated Harry,” he said.

“What did he ask you, to get that information?” asked Harry, in a low, angry voice.

“Whether you were ashamed of anything.”

Harry’s eyebrows knit towards each other in an expression Draco could not read.

“Did you ever intend to hurt Harry Potter?” asked Kingsley.

“Of course not.”

“Would you ever hurt him?”

“Not willingly.”

Kingsley nodded.

“That’s all, I think. Certainly enough to establish Steven Hodges’ guilt, and —”

“Are you in pain right now?” interrupted Harry.

“No more than usual,” said Draco. Hermione gave a little sob, and Harry looked ready to hit something.

“He will go to St Mungo’s while we decide how to proceed,” said Kingsley. “Obviously, the bond cannot be reinstated now that we know how susceptible it is to abuse. However, I doubt we can shorten his sentence—”

“You can’t send him back to Azkaban,” said Harry. “You can’t. It’s not his fault that he was tortured half to death, you can’t punish him for that!”

Kingsley held out a conciliatory hand.

“I know, Harry. I agree. But neither can we simply release him.”

Draco could feel the Veritaserum wearing off. In its absence, emotions came rushing back to him in an overwhelming cascade, and he shook his hair into his face to cover it.

His mother knelt beside him.

“Don’t embarrass yourself,” she said. “If you cry they’ll know how pathetic you are.”

He blinked back his tears and stared at her strange, warped face. His mother would never have said that. He was almost sure of it. Her voice didn’t sound right, either. It was rougher than he remembered.

“Are you okay?” asked Harry. Draco had to stop himself from snapping at him out of habit.

“Be brave,” said his mother. “Don’t complain.”

Draco watched her steadily as he answered.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Look at all this trouble you’ve made for everyone,” said his mother. Draco wondered why she had refused him, in the summer of fifth year, when he asked her to run away with him. It was the only time they could have—Lucius would have been safe from suspicion of helping them, since he was in Azkaban, and Draco had not yet taken the Mark. Draco had begged her.

“You can go,” she told him. “But I would never abandon your father.”

And Draco could never have abandoned her. Her loyalty condemned him. A week later, the Dark Lord called him to his presence and announced that Draco was to be granted the very great honour of the Dark Mark and a noble task. He had just turned sixteen.

“Is your mother there?” Harry asked him. He spoke quietly into Draco’s ear. Draco nodded, even though he didn’t want Harry to think he was crazy.

“You need some sleep,” said Harry.

“I’m not crazy,” said Draco.

“I know you’re not. Will you floo with me to St Mungo’s?”

Draco found he could stand. Kingsley had removed the ropes tying him to his chair. He was unsteady on his feet, and Harry wrapped an arm around his waist, guiding him to the fireplace. Kingsley, Professor McGonagall and Hermione were all talking, but Draco could only focus on Harry.

“It feels better without the bond,” said Harry. “I hated accidentally ordering you around all the time.”

“You’re the only person I would trust with that kind of power,” said Draco, absently. His mother had followed them to the fireplace. She was hissing for him to be quiet. “You’ve never been vengeful.”

“Sometimes I have,” said Harry. “I’ve really wanted to hurt people, before.”

Draco leant into him.

“You never meant to hurt me, though.”

“No,” said Harry, tugging him close. “Are you ready for the green light?”

“I hate floo powder,” said Draco.

At St Mungo’s, they prodded and poked Draco to within an inch of his life. They healed all his surface wounds, but the spell damage was more complicated. They dosed him up with potions and put him to bed. Harry stayed by his side through it all, talking about quidditch with false gaiety.

“Ginny should be here soon,” he said, once Draco was finally in bed.

“I don’t want to inconvenience her,” said Draco, thinking of one of his mother’s earliest lessons: *The easiest way to be polite is to assume that everything you do, at all times, is a huge inconvenience.*

“She’s your friend,” said Harry. “She’ll want to be here. Anyway, Hermione and I have to go talk to Kingsley, and I don’t want you to be alone.”

“I’m all right,” said Draco. “I can be alone.”

“Yeah, I know you’re *capable* of withstanding all sorts of hardships, Draco. The point is that I’d rather you didn’t have to.”

Draco shrugged. He was so relieved to be free of the bond that he didn’t much care what else happened to him. He wasn’t going to be tortured into madness. That was quite enough, for now.

18. Chapter 18

When he woke up, the ward was dark, and Ginny Weasley was asleep in his arms. She had crawled into bed with him, and her head was nestled in the crook of his shoulder. Harry was gone.

He considered waking her, but she was so soft and warm, and she must have climbed in of her own accord. She had wanted to touch him. It was deeply, fundamentally comforting. He closed his eyes again and fell asleep to the even sound of her breathing.

When he next woke up, she was watching him. Moonlight filtered in through the windows. He squeezed her close.

“You’re going to be okay,” she said, in a hushed voice, as if she was in church.

It was intimate in the dark, and he felt as if he was dreaming. It was freeing.

“I’ve never had a friend like you,” he said quietly.

“A friend like me, how?”

Draco paused, trying to find the words. It wasn’t that there hadn’t been anyone worthy of friendship in Slytherin. Quite the opposite. But Draco had been so obsessed with power and prestige and respect that he had entirely failed to connect with anyone at all. He’d had henchmen and acolytes. He’d never had...

“Someone I wasn’t trying to get power over, I guess,” he said. He knew how awful that made him sound, but Ginny didn’t react, except to nod.

“Me, too,” she said.

“What?”

“I spent my first few years at Hogwarts totally besotted with Harry. I had Fred and George, but I hero-worshipped them, and I had Luna, but that’s a bit like being friends with a piece of conceptual art. Harry, Ron and Hermione let me tag along sometimes, as a sort of kid sister. Then I got pretty, and I just wanted to find out what that could get me.” She looked at him seriously. “You’re the first friend I’ve ever had who felt like my equal.”

“I’m not your equal, Gin,” whispered Draco.

Ginny laughed.

“Oh, I know, you’re much prettier than me, and posher, and you know which fork to use at fancy restaurants.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

The smile dropped from her face.

“It isn’t when things are going well for people that we see their true characters. It’s when things collapse. Your life blew up and you responded with dignity and grace.”

“That’s a front,” said Draco. “I just did that so that people would like me.”

“It worked,” said Ginny. “I like you.”

Draco shook his head helplessly. She didn’t understand, she didn’t know about— about the lessons, about his mother, about how he couldn’t feel remorse.

“You just don’t know me well enough,” he said. “I’ve—I’ve manipulated you into liking me.”

“That’s called charm, Draco. You have it in spades.”

“No, it’s different. You’ll see— when you know me better. You’ll see that you don’t actually like me.”

Ginny burrowed into him.

“Do you still think I’m a dirty, impoverished blood traitor?” she asked.

“I’m ashamed I ever thought that.”

“I think we’re probably fine, then.”

Draco shook his head again.

“No,” he said. “You’ll see.”

“You’re the one who’ll see, Draco, when I’m still around in ten years.”

Draco didn’t know how to answer that. His mind went to something she had said earlier that had lodged itself in his throat.

“Are you still besotted with Harry?”

“No.”

“Oh,” said Draco.

Ginny shifted in his arms.

“He’s never spoken about it to anyone, but I get the impression he didn’t have a great childhood,” she said.

Draco was quiet. Harry *had* spoken to him about his childhood. Rather at length, in fact. It had never occurred to him that he was hearing *secrets*.

Who did you share secrets with? People you trusted, surely. How betrayed would Harry feel, when he realised that Draco wasn’t worthy of that trust?

“I guess I just want him to be with someone who’ll take care of him,” finished Ginny. “Someone who will love him like he deserves.” She pushed his hair out of his face. “That’s what I want for you, too.”

Something light and feathery bloomed in his chest. *One day, you’ll find a boy who will love you the way you deserve to be loved*, his mother had said, all those years ago. Now here was Ginny, saying more or less the same

thing. It was an aching sort of joy, and Draco closed his eyes, trying not to smile.

“You’re a sop, Ginny Weasley.”

“You love it.”

“Won’t Blaise be jealous to find you in bed with me?”

“Hmm, he might be, if you weren’t incurably homosexual.”

“I see. Well, since you’re planning on staying, would you mind not taking up three quarters of the bed? I am the invalid here, you know.”

“Whinge, whinge, whinge...!” said Ginny, but she moved over. They talked about Blaise for a little while longer— Ginny was beginning to feel quite serious about him—and fell asleep.

When Draco woke up, Ginny was still in his arms, Harry was asleep in the chair next to his bed, and Ron was staring at Draco in abject horror.

“I’m gay!” blurted out Draco. Harry and Ginny both woke up with a start.

“Then why are you *sleeping with my sister?*” asked Ron.

“Only literally,” said Draco.

“Ron, stop trying to protect Ginny’s virginity, we all know that ship has sailed,” said Harry. Ginny laughed.

“Mmm, Draco, thank you for all the sexy sex we sexed last night,” she said.

“Right, I came to give you a get-well gift,” said Ron. “But I’ll just fuck off, shall I?”

“You got him a gift?” said Harry, sounding pleased.

“Yeah, well, Hermione said he’s not a massive twat anymore, so I thought...”

Draco struggled to sit up in his bed. Ginny sighed and got out. Ron seemed relieved to see that she was fully clothed.

“You said something about a gift,” said Draco hopefully. Ron handed him a box of chocolates.

“They make you sleepy. Thought it might be nicer than taking sleeping potions all the time while you’re recovering.”

“That’s incredibly thoughtful,” said Draco. It was surprisingly easy to be polite and gracious to Ron when he thought of him as Ginny’s brother and Harry’s best friend, rather than as Ron Weasley, the boy who made fun of his name on the first day of school.

“That’s me,” said Ron. “Thoughtful Ron Weasley.”

“Where’s Hermione?” asked Draco.

“She’s testifying against Steven Hodges,” said Harry. “She didn’t want you to have to go through it again, so she’s showing the court her memory of your account.”

Draco was at a loss for words. From afar, it had always seemed as if Hermione was the verbally demonstrative one in Harry’s little friend group, yet she had never been so to Draco. He had assumed she merely tolerated him. This sign of her kindness towards him made him feel terrible. He could not forget all the numbers on Harry’s list that had involved her.

"That was fast," he managed to say.

Ginny grinned.

"Harry pulled his Saviour of the Wizarding World card. He seems to do that a lot when you're involved, Draco."

"Shut up," said Harry, looking embarrassed, which was probably why Ron attempted to change the subject.

"So, is it really true?" he asked, conversationally. "Are you really not a bigoted Death Eater bastard anymore?"

"Do you feel remorse?" hissed Draco's mother in his ear. He turned sharply to look at her. Her face was distorted, disintegrating, rotting. She was leaning towards him on his pillow, her expression cruel and mocking. "They all think you do. Do you think they'd give a shit about you, if they really knew you?"

In the Malfoy household, it was only ever Draco who swore.

"Is your mother there?" asked Harry quietly, in his other ear. Distantly, Draco could hear Ron and Ginny's voices, but he couldn't focus enough to understand them.

He nodded.

Harry sat on the bed and crouched around him.

"I was thinking of Grimmauld Place for Christmas," he said. "Because that way you can bake. Have you ever made mince pies?"

"You're lying to him," said his mother.

"No," said Draco.

"Ah, well, there's a first time for everything," said Harry. "I can be sous-chef. Ginny wants you to come stay at the Burrow, of course. We can do that if you want, but I'm warning you, Mrs. Weasley doesn't allow interlopers in her kitchen."

"If you were stupid, Draco, perhaps you could have been forgiven," said his mother. "But you knew it was wrong. You knew, yet you still cast the cruciatus at children. You still attempted murder. And yet, you don't feel remorse."

“I...”

“Did you ever have a really great Christmas?” asked Harry.

Draco nodded.

“Tell me about it,” said Harry.

“The more he knows you, the less he’ll like you,” said his mother.

“Christmas I was seven,” mumbled Draco. “Got my first broomstick. Flew it around the living room, fell off, hit my face on the coffee table. It was brilliant. Flying.”

“You were there when I first flew,” said Harry.

“I was a dick,” said Draco.

“Still, you were there,” said Harry. “You’ve been there practically my whole life. Consistently.”

Draco turned to look at him. He knew what consistency meant to Harry. Harry’s face was very close to his, and he was smiling.

“Like a chronic disease,” said Draco.

Harry laughed.

“Yeah, exactly. Like an ache in the joints.”

“I was so pissed off you were good at flying. I really thought I’d have the advantage over you, there.”

“Nope,” said Harry, smugly. “I’m better.”

“You’re not *better*,” said Draco. “You’re just more reckless. And you had a better broom, most of the time.”

“You say reckless. I say *brave*.”

“Get your big head off my pillow, Potter, you’re squashing me with your egotism.”

Harry grinned and leant away from the bed. Then he lowered his voice.

“Is she gone?”

Draco looked around.

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry about Ron.”

Draco shuddered.

“Don’t, Potter.” He sat up in bed and addressed Ron. “Apologies, Weasley. I got distracted.”

“Sorry, mate, didn’t mean to set you off like that,” said Ron, uncomfortably. “What was that?”

“Leave it,” said Harry.

“So what’s going on with the bond?” asked Ginny, as if nothing had happened. “Are you reinstating it?”

Harry cast a *muffliato* on them and glanced at Draco rather hesitantly.

“Hermione and Kingsley and I were up all night, trying to figure out what to do. The best we could come up with was to, um, pretend we’ve reinstated the bond.”

“Pretend?” asked Draco.

“Yeah. Kingsley liked it as a plan because it means if anyone else tries to take advantage of you, you can report it. It does mean if I accidentally order you to do something in public, you’d have to obey. But apart from that, you’d be free. And then Kingsley will arrange for your sentence to end early for good behaviour, around Easter.” Harry looked at him entreatingly. “It’s the best I could do.”

“But... what if I...isn’t that sort of risky? For *you*?”

“No, why?”

“I could hurt you.”

Ginny snorted.

“Yeah, I think I’ll take my chances, Draco,” said Harry. “I heard what you said on Veritaserum, remember.”

“I could hurt someone else.”

“You won’t.”

“But if I did, you’d get half the blame. And Kingsley would be sacked.”

“He trusts me. And I trust you.”

“Are you fucking crazy? I’m a Death Eater!”

Harry looked puzzled.

“Yeah, I know? I haven’t forgotten.”

Draco collapsed back into his pillows.

“Well, it’s your decision, Potter. I think you’re a fucking lunatic.”

“With you on that one, mate,” said Ron.

“So you’ll do it?” prodded Harry.

“Of course I’ll do it. Thank you. You’re crazy.”

“I’ve been told that before,” said Harry, and Draco felt a sudden stab of guilt.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

The door opened and Hermione came stumbling in, looking exhausted. Harry removed the *muffliato* and Ron stood so that she could take his chair.

“Well, Steven’s been found guilty and sentenced to three years in Azkaban.”

“Three?” said Harry, outraged. “Only *three*?”

“Three’s plenty,” said Draco. “You don’t know Azkaban.”

“I know what he did to you.”

“I wonder how he’ll turn out,” said Draco. “It’ll go one way or the other. Bitterness, or redemption.”

“You seem very calm about all this,” said Ginny.

“Deserving is complicated,” said Draco.

“‘*Deserving is complicated*’?” repeated Ron, in disbelief.

“He actually says things like that quite often,” said Hermione.

“Thank you, Hermione. For testifying for me.”

He said it as if he was saying sorry, because he would never let himself say that. He was too selfish a person to trust himself with apologies. Who were they even for?

“That’s all right, Draco,” said Hermione, with a loaded, serious look in her eyes. He got the impression she understood.

A nurse came in and told them they all had to clear out. Harry leant close to Draco and whispered.

“I’m lending Ginny my invisibility cloak so that she can keep you company tonight.”

Draco didn’t have time to answer before Harry and his friends had been swept away.

Draco stayed in St Mungo’s for a week. Hermione went back to Hogwarts, but Harry and Ginny stayed at Grimmauld Place to keep him company. Ginny spent the nights with him.

“Don’t *you* want to stay in Draco’s bed, Harry?” asked Ginny, smirking.

“Not a good idea,” said Harry.

It wasn’t even that he had such an insatiable sexual appetite. It was that he was convinced that Draco needed Ginny more than him, just then. He remembered what Draco had said, when that girl had cast a stinging charm at him in the library: that he knew why Harry and Hermione were nice to him, but he didn’t know why Ginny was. Draco needed that, now: someone he didn’t think had ulterior motives. And Harry didn’t want to be Draco’s only port in a storm; he wanted Draco to have options.

So Ginny sneaked into St Mungo’s every evening, and Harry visited in the day.

“Are you going to sleep with him?” asked Ginny.

“No,” said Draco.

“Why not? Don’t you want to?”

“I want to.”

“So...?”

“Once lust is sated, the object of desire becomes loathsome,” said Draco.

“What kind of Miltonian bullshit is that? What, you think he’ll fuck you and realise he still hates you?”

“I’m not sure who would do the fucking,” said Draco thoughtfully.

“Don’t try and distract me. Are you seriously saying you think he’ll turn on you if you guys date?”

“We wouldn’t *date*.”

“You don’t want to date him?”

“Ginny...I want... I want my parents and your brother to still be alive. I want to go back in time and change everything. I want to date Harry. So what?”

“Well, obviously that last one is different, because it’s actually possible.” She paused. “Thank you for saying that about Fred, though.”

Draco nodded, although he didn’t know if she could see him in the dark.

“You don’t believe that it’s possible Harry might actually want to date you,” said Ginny.

“It’s not about belief, Gin. I *know* it’s not possible.”

“I think I know Harry a little better than you, Draco.”

“And I know myself. Trust me, he won’t want me.”

“Were you always this insecure?” asked Ginny, in wonder. “How did we miss it?”

“It’s not insecurity.”

“Harry *likes* you.”

“Because he doesn’t *know* me!”

“Okay,” said Ginny, as if she was talking to a skittish horse. “Okay. But you *do* want to date him.”

“Ginny, come on, don’t be unkind.”

“You want me not to talk about it anymore?”

“Please.”

“Okay,” she said. “Your wish is my command.”

She didn’t bring it up again.

She came every night. Sometimes she slept in his bed, sometimes she fell asleep in the chair next to him. She prodded and pried at him until he admitted how scared he had been when Steven cornered him, how much it had hurt, how sure he had been that no help would come.

“I knew there was something wrong,” she said. “Your hands. I feel so stupid.”

“Don’t.”

“I figured it was just a post-war trauma thing.”

“It’s really fine. It’s over.”

But when Ginny told him how much she cared about him, it always led to Draco panicking, trying to explain to her that *she didn’t understand*.

“Of course you like me!” he said, one night. “That’s exactly what I wanted you to feel! It’s a fucking trick, and you’re guileless Gryffindors, so you all fell for it, like fools!”

Ginny handed him a handkerchief.

“Fuck,” he said. He hadn’t realised he was crying. He felt wretched, but his mother didn’t appear. She only ever seemed to when Draco was alone, or when he was with Harry. He thought it was probably because he trusted Harry not to freak out and call him crazy. Harry knew what it felt like to have people think you were crazy.

Anyway, whenever Draco’s mother appeared when Harry was in the room, Harry always noticed right away and talked to him about something mundane until she left. Draco wasn’t sure how Harry knew to make her leave, but he was grateful all the same.

“Who cares why we became friends?” said Ginny. “It’s happened, now.”

“Please don’t,” said Draco.

“What are you so scared of?”

“Losing you! Losing everything, again!”

Ginny nodded.

“Okay,” she said. “That makes sense. I can be patient. So can Harry.”

“Please don’t,” said Draco, again. So she moved on to something else, and Draco’s heart stopped feeling so full and fluttery. She hurt him when she said things like that, because hope was poison for people like Draco.

19. Chapter 19

In the day, Harry kept him company. He was reading the ninth *Clutch of Snitches* book, the one that was largely porn, and he blushed almost constantly as he read. Draco found it very distracting. Especially because Harry would sometimes glance up at Draco with a thoughtful look, his pupils wide and dark, and then blush even harder. It wasn't difficult to translate what he was imagining. Draco had read *Beater's Torment*, after all.

Ron came by from time to time, and was polite to Draco in a baffled sort of way. It was clear that he visited out of a keen sense of duty, both to Hermione and to Harry, but he could not quite figure out how his life had turned out his way: checking in on *Draco Malfoy*. Draco thought for a while about what it was that Ron needed from him, before he realised. Ron needed an opportunity to prove to Harry and Hermione that he'd matured. So Draco was cordial to Ron, and Ron was courteous back, and they developed a relationship not unlike that of work colleagues. When Ron stumbled and insulted Draco by accident—which happened with some frequency—Draco always responded with placid grace, to make it easy for Ron to apologise.

"I'm really surprised at him," said Ginny. "He's making such an effort."

"It's not for me," said Draco. "It's for you guys. But I suppose that doesn't make it any less impressive."

Ginny gave him a sorrowful look, but didn't say anything.

Finally, Draco was discharged from St Mungo's.

"Will he be able to fly again?" asked Harry. Draco hadn't asked any questions about how his health would affect his future, as far as Harry could tell. His hands still shook uncontrollably at random intervals, and his healer had implied that this would be a lifelong condition. Harry thought of

Draco's favourite things—potions, baking, flying—and of how they all required a steady hand.

"It's too soon to tell," said the healer. "There's a high risk that his hands might give way while he's in the air. For the moment, it's too dangerous."

Draco didn't look as if he was listening, but Harry knew, from the soft downturn of his lips, that he was.

"But it should get better with time, right?" said Harry.

"With chronic conditions like this..." began the healer. Draco cut her off.

"It's just a new way of being," he said. "It's fine. I'll adapt." He smiled at Harry. "I thought it would be worse."

Harry wanted to kiss him so badly that he knew it must be written all over his face. He coughed and looked away.

"Well, the portkey's ready," he said. Draco nodded, thanked the healer, and touched the empty potions vial with Harry. Seconds later, the portkey activated, and they were both transported back to their sitting room at Hogwarts.

They dropped the old potions vial and looked at each other. It was the first time they'd been alone together since the bond had been removed.

"Um," said Harry.

"Thank you." Draco's eyes were fixed intently on him; they were silvery grey, pale, with a dark ring around the irises.

"You were wrong, you know," said Harry. "When you spoke to *The Prophet*. I'm not ashamed of wanting you."

Draco blinked at him. Harry wanted to touch him. He wanted to feel every inch of Draco pressed up beside him. Instead, he clenched his fists.

Draco's right hand had gone to his left forearm. He held it as if it hurt.

“Are you okay?” asked Harry.

“Yes.” Draco’s gaze dropped to his mouth, and he took a step forward, trailing his hand delicately over Harry’s chest.

“Draco,” said Harry hoarsely. “I want to kiss you.”

“You can,” said Draco, his voice just as raw.

Harry shook his head.

“No, it’s...” he took a step backwards. “No. I still have too much power over you, it’d be weird. And I don’t want to fuck up our friendship.”

Draco’s face cracked open in a dazzling smile.

“You don’t?”

“No,” said Harry, uncertainly.

“I don’t either,” said Draco. He looked so happy and relieved that Harry knew he’d made the right decision, even though a significant part of him wanted to tackle Draco to the ground and drag him to this bedroom.

“So, er, just friends,” he said.

“I wasn’t sleeping with Steven,” said Draco. “Or anyone else.”

“I know. You said, on Veritaserum.”

Draco nodded.

“It would have been okay, if you were,” said Harry. “I mean, if you wanted to be with someone else. I mean. Just because we’re sort of living together—I just mean—”

“Don’t hurt yourself, Potter. I get it, you don’t want to control me.”

“I really don’t.”

Draco sighed and flopped down on the sofa.

“You’re too good for this world, Potter. Now, what have I got to do to get you to stroke my hair?”

So they fell back into the routine they had had when they first got to Hogwarts. Except everything was better. Harry made sure Draco had plenty of time to spend alone with Ginny and, increasingly, Luna. Draco went back to how he had been in Grimmauld Place: observant, quiet, questioning. However, he wasn’t quite as shuttered as he had been. For instance, he sometimes answered questions without thinking for a minute first. He was honest about when he wasn’t feeling well (the spell damage lingered, and some days he had headaches that made it hard for him to talk).

On the days when he seemed unhappiest, his mother would appear. Harry always knew when this happened, because Draco would suddenly freeze, his face transfixed with horror and guilt. Whatever she said to Draco, it always made him worse. Harry took to distracting him, trying to drown her out.

From what Draco had told Harry about his mother, the apparition who visited him seemed to have little to do with the real Narcissa Malfoy. But Harry did not say this Draco, because mentioning Draco’s mother was a good way to make Draco retreat into himself for a day.

“I was serious about Grimmauld Place, you know. For Christmas,” said Harry. Draco had his head in his lap. There was fire in the grate; it crackled peacefully, although neither of them liked to get too close. They were both a bit touchy around fire.

“Festive elf heads on the wall,” murmured Draco.

“We put Father Christmas hats on them.”

“That’s macabre, Potter.”

“Mrs. Weasley’s invited us to the Burrow for Christmas dinner.”

Draco shifted a little.

“She’s invited *you*,” he said.

“Ginny’s been loads happier since you two became friends. You’d be welcome.”

“I truly think I’d be intruding.”

“I used to think that, when I went. But now they’re like my family.”

“Let me think about it.”

On days when Draco’s spell damage acted up, Harry, Ginny and Hermione did everything they could to make things easier for him. They never spoke about it, and they tried not to let Draco notice the small ways they structured their days around him. He would have protested vehemently. But he didn’t seem to notice that on the days when his head hurt and his balance was worse, Harry was always at his side, with his arm hooked through his, and Ginny served food onto his plate at lunch when his hands trembled too badly, and Hermione helped him read through his notes when his eyes ached.

Harry found he was really looking forward to the holidays. He would get to see Ron more, and, most importantly, he’d get to spend more time alone with Draco.

Draco fell asleep on his shoulder on the train to London. Ginny drew a heart around them in the air with her finger.

“Don’t be weird,” said Harry. Draco shifted, and Harry put his arms around his shoulder and kissed the top of his head.

“No, you’re right, I’m reading into things,” said Ginny. “This is all totally normal.”

“Shut up,” said Harry.

He had started thinking more and more about Easter, when Draco's sentence would officially be lifted. Once he was no longer legally responsible for Draco's actions, might Draco consider...?

Kreacher had decorated Grimmauld Place for Christmas. It was still horrible, but Draco baked sugar cookies and Harry helped ice them and Harry realised that this was the sort of thing he had wanted all his life. Long afternoons with someone handsome and funny and thoughtful, someone who listened to Harry as if he was important, without making Harry feel as if he *had* to talk.

"You're my best friend," he said, as Draco showed him how to melt the icing slightly so that it went on smoother. Draco's hands were steady that afternoon, but he baked even when they weren't. He simply tidied up and started again each time he dropped or spilled something, with an unerring patience that Harry could not remember noticing at Hogwarts. Although, perhaps this was the evolution of the dogged determination which had pushed Draco to plague Harry so thoroughly all the way through school.

"That's too runny," said Draco now, guiding Harry's wand.

"Did you hear me?"

Draco caught his eye. He smiled, but his expression was serious.

"Yeah," he said.

"I mean it."

"You're high on sugar, Potter. And betraying Ron and Hermione."

"No. They're each other's best friends. They wouldn't begrudge me this."

Draco's face contorted, and Harry knew that he was listening to whatever horrible things his mother said to him. He put a hand on Draco's.

"Hey," he said. "Can I put blue food dye in this icing?"

Draco turned sharply towards him.

“No! Blue is an unappetising colour. Nor is it Christmassy!”

“How about purple?”

“Get out of my kitchen.”

Harry laughed (“*my kitchen*”!) and after a pause, Draco did too, showing all his teeth. His mother seemed to have gone, and he was happy again.

Ginny, Ron, Hermione and George showed up at Grimmauld Place the next morning, bundled up in woolly hats and coats.

“Ice skating!” said Ginny, pulling Draco off the sofa.

“Where?” he asked.

“There’s a public rink—”

“Absolutely not,” said Draco. George Weasley scoffed and tried to exchange a look with Ron, who remained heroically neutral. Draco straightened his jumper. Which was actually Harry’s jumper. The red one Harry had given him when he first arrived. Draco wore it a lot, even though he had his own clothes, now. “There’s a skating pond in Wiltshire,” said Draco. “I don’t fancy skating over little Muggle children in a crowded public rink at Christmas time, thanks.”

“Wiltshire sounds nice,” said Hermione brightly. “Tell us where to apparate to, and we’ll try it!”

George Weasley still seemed deeply uncertain about the whole thing, but when he saw that no one would take his side, he conceded defeat.

It was one of the most beautiful places Harry had ever been to. The pond, it transpired, was a pool of frozen water in a glittering, snow-clad forest. It was silent and empty apart from the birdsong. Draco taught them a spell to transfigure their shoes into skates—Hermione insisted on doing her own, but it turned out that Draco’s charm made for sharper blades. The ice was thick and strong. Harry had never been ice skating before, so Ginny held his

hands and skated backwards until he got used to it. He had hoped Draco might do that, but Draco was too busy speeding along, spinning and jumping and crowing. He hadn't looked so well in... in years, Harry thought. He didn't seem ill, or unhappy, or broken. On the contrary: he looked fiercely, vibrantly alive. It made Harry want something he couldn't explain to himself.

Draco carried on skating long after they had all grown tired and cold. They sat in the sleigh Hermione had transfigured ("of course, I can't do reindeer") and drank the hot chocolate Harry asked Kreacher to bring them. The others talked and laughed. Harry watched Draco, who raced around the pond, doing laps.

"He can't fly anymore," Ginny told George.

Harry caught Hermione's eye and smiled. She had helped him with Draco's Christmas present.

After a while, even Ginny started complaining about the cold.

"Someone drag Draco off the ice, I want to go home," she said.

"You guys go ahead," said Harry, who didn't want Draco to stop skating a second before he had to. He was moving so fast. He never got to move that fast, anymore.

So Hermione, Ron, Ginny and George all hugged him and waved goodbye to Draco, who didn't even notice when they left. They apparated away, and Harry refreshed his warming charm. He curled up in the sleigh and watched Draco fly around the ice. It was just the two of them, alone together in Wiltshire. It was funny thinking that a year ago, that would have made his skin prickle with fear.

Eventually, Draco glided over to the bank and came trudging up to the sleigh. Harry hopped down to greet him, transfiguring Draco's skates back to shoes.

“Who knew you were such a skating enthusiast,” said Harry. Draco stiffened slightly.

“This is right near my house. My old house, I mean. The Manor. I used to come here every day, in the winter.”

“Much better than a public rink,” said Harry.

Draco’s cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bright.

“Hold still,” he commanded. “You have an eyelash.”

Was this what it had felt like when he ordered Draco through the bond, he wondered? Harry couldn’t move an inch, because he had to do what Draco told him. He had to, because Draco was reaching forward to touch him, and if Harry moved at all, he might stop, and Harry would implode.

Draco’s hand was hot against Harry’s cheek. His fingers plucked something from his skin, and then he held up his index to Harry’s mouth.

“Make a wish,” he said.

I wish this isn’t too good to be true, wished Harry, and blew the curled eyelash away.

“What did you wish for?” asked Draco. He spoke quietly, but he was so close that Harry didn’t miss a word. His lips were pink and chapped.

“I can’t tell you,” said Harry, dragging his eyes away from Draco’s mouth, “or it won’t come true.”

Draco leant slowly forward and kissed him.

Draco was kissing him. Of his own accord. He had definitely instigated that. Harry hadn’t forced him, or pressured him, he was sure he hadn’t, and yet Draco’s lips were moving against his, and his arms were wrapping themselves around Harry, and it was so hot and sparkling and vivid that Harry couldn’t believe it, and then the kiss was over, and Harry was astonished by how clearly he knew—

“Sorry,” said Draco.

“I love you,” said Harry.

20. Chapter 20

Draco barely had time to process what Harry had said before his mother appeared, screeching, at his side. He could only make out snippets of what she said through her incandescent rage: “*don’t let him find out*” and “*if he knew—*” and “*he could never love someone like you!*”

“Draco,” said Harry.

“I can’t hear myself *think*,” Draco told his mother.

This shut her up, but only for a moment.

“He didn’t mean it,” she said.

“Draco,” said Harry again.

“You don’t understand,” Draco said to Harry. “You don’t know—”

“Shut up, shut up, you’ll lose him!” shouted his mother.

“Yes, but he deserves to know!” Draco told her.

“Draco, just talk to us,” said Harry.

Draco swivelled around to look at him.

“‘Us’?”

“Me and your mother. I know she’s there. Just talk to us both. Tell me what she’s saying.”

He spoke as if he was being perfectly reasonable, but he wasn’t, he *wasn’t*, and Draco knew Harry was shrinking under Draco’s withering look, but he couldn’t help it, because,

“My mother’s *dead*, Potter.”

Harry shrugged.

“Doesn’t make her any less real. What’s she saying?”

Draco’s mother leaned close to his ear.

“Just pretend,” she whispered. “Just pretend, forever. Don’t let him know how worthless you are.”

“No,” said Draco, sharply. Harry looked concerned.

“You know she loved you, right, Draco? More than anything? She would have wanted you to be happy.”

“I can’t be happy,” said Draco, distracted, because his mother was making a strange hissing sound, and he was suddenly aware that she reminded him almost as much of a dementor as of his mother; with her greying, rotting skin, and the chilling doom she evoked. “I can’t—Harry, you don’t *know* me...”

“I do, actually,” said Harry lightly. “I know that you hold yourself to impossibly high standards, and that you’re considerate in slightly manipulative ways, and that I’ve spent the last six or so months falling in love with you.”

“You can’t love me,” said Draco, trying to make Harry see reason.

“Try and stop me.”

“He’d stop all right, if he knew how you feel about the war,” said his mother. “*He can never find out...!*”

Draco was so sick of it, so sick of hiding, so sick of obeying.

“I don’t feel remorse!” he said, louder than he had intended. Harry took a step backwards in surprise— but no more.

“What?”

“For the war. I don’t— I can’t feel remorse.”

“Okay,” said Harry. Draco’s mother started to scream. Draco put his hands over his ears and shut his eyes.

“No, Potter, it’s not fucking okay, because I was a fucking blood supremacist who tried to murder people! Look at this—” he pulled up his left sleeve, waving the Dark Mark in Harry’s face, “Look at it! I chose this! And it’s here, on my arm, *forever!*”

Harry caught his arm and covered the Mark with his hands.

“You’ll get cold,” he said, gently rolling the sleeve down. Draco wanted to cry.

“Don’t you understand?” he asked Harry. “Are you even listening to me?”

Harry was unyieldingly patient.

“Why don’t you tell me why you think you can’t feel remorse, and then I’ll tell you why it doesn’t upset me,” he said.

“Because...” Draco began to pace around in the snow, his mother trailing after him, although she had fallen mercifully quiet. “Because I’m too angry.”

“At who?” asked Harry. He stayed still, only watching as Draco paced back and forth, back and forth.

“At—” Draco glanced at his mother, and stopped himself.

“At your mother?” suggested Harry.

“I can’t be angry at her,” said Draco bitterly. “She’s dead.”

“I’m angry at Dumbledore, still. I thought he loved me like a parent, and he...” Harry trailed off. “You can be angry at your mother,” he finished.

Draco shook his head.

“No. I forgave her. Before she died. I forgave them both. When they asked.”

“But you didn’t, really. Did you?” asked Harry.

“I told them I did. I promised them I did. Mother, *please* stop crying!”

“It was their job to protect you, and instead they got you tangled up at the heart of a war.”

“Wars are always fought by the young,” said Draco. “They did what they thought was right. I should have known better. I *did* know better. I should have run away, even when my mother refused to go with me.”

“She refused?” asked Harry, and he finally seemed shocked.

Draco’s mother was clawing at her face, and her flesh was so rotten that bits of it came peeling away.

“Mother, please, *please* don’t,” said Draco. He stopped pacing to watch the nightmare she had become. This was a weariness he recognised. It was what he had felt in sixth year, when he realised that he had picked the wrong side, and that he still had to live out the rest of his miserable, squandered little life.

“You said you forgave me,” wailed his mother.

“I...”

“She shouldn’t have done that,” said Harry softly.

Draco glanced at him. Harry looked so real, standing in the snow next to Hermione’s ridiculous sleigh.

“What difference does it make?”

“I’d feel betrayed, if I were you,” said Harry.

“I can’t,” said Draco. “I can’t hate them and miss them this much.”

“You can love someone and still resent them,” said Harry. “I do it all the time.”

Draco was startled into a laugh.

“Draco,” sobbed his mother, “Draco...”

“But I *told* them I forgave them,” said Draco. Harry smiled a little, his eyes full of sympathy.

“And you will,” he said. “Eventually.”

“Eventually,” said Draco slowly.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Just give yourself a second. What’s the rush?”

“I...”

“I haven’t misread this, have I? She’s in your head, yeah?”

Draco looked at his weeping mother and nodded.

“Yeah. She’s in my head.”

“So it’s not *your mother* who’s making you feel guilty about this. It’s you.”

“I hadn’t... thought of it like that.”

“Ask her to give you some time,” said Harry.

“Draco,” sobbed his mother. Her hair had fallen in front of her face, her long, beautiful hair, that still looked just right. When he looked at her hair, it was as if he had his mother back again.

“I miss you,” he said. “I miss you every day.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I’m glad I told you forgave you,” said Draco. “I’m glad I could give you that. But I... I’m still angry. At you. I’m angry at you. Is that...is that okay?”

Her shoulders stopped heaving. He was glad he couldn’t see her face. He realised he couldn’t really remember what it looked like, not exactly. That was why it had morphed so terribly. His memory was failing him.

“Yes,” she said, in a small voice. “I love you.”

“I know,” he said. He reached out and took a strand of her silver-bright hair between his thumb and forefinger, and for a second, he really could feel it, fine as satin. “I love you too.”

Then, she was gone. Draco stood alone, his hand extended in front of him, and knew she would never come back.

He dropped his hand to his side. Harry came to stand by him, and rested his head gently against Draco’s shoulder.

“Let’s go home,” said Harry.

“Home,” repeated Draco blankly.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Home.”

Harry took them straight to the living room of Grimmauld Place. Draco stepped away from him when they arrived.

“So, I’m crazy,” he told Harry. “Absolutely off my nut.”

“You’re grieving.”

Draco laughed softly and trailed a shaking hand through his hair.

“Yeah, that too.”

Harry sat, and after a brief hesitation, Draco sat too, sideways, at the other end of the sofa. Harry tried to think of something to say that wasn’t “I love you.” He was not feeling very inspired. “I love you” seemed like the only possible option. Thankfully, Draco spoke.

“So, now you know. Remorse is about responsibility. I can’t take responsibility, because I still blame my parents. So, I’m a piece of shit, basically.”

Harry couldn’t help himself. He laughed. The look Draco flashed him held all the vitriol of Malfoy-stomping-on-his-face-in-a-train-carriage.

“Sorry,” said Harry. “It’s just— you’re not.”

“How can you not be upset about this? Does lust really scramble your moral compass this badly? If only the Dark Lord had known...”

Harry shifted so that he was sitting cross-legged, facing Draco.

“It’s not lust. I told you. I’m in love with you. And I couldn’t be in love with you if you didn’t feel remorse.”

“Yes, exactly, Potter, that’s what I’m saying—”

“How are you this thick, Draco? You *do* feel remorse. Your best friend is Ginny Weasley, for God’s sake. The blood traitor?”

“Don’t call her that.”

“Right!”

“That doesn’t—that’s not remorse! That’s just... shame, and... and regret... and... it’s shame. It’s different.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Obviously!”

“Sounds like remorse to me.”

“Yeah, well, I tricked you into falling in love with me so that I could get my reputation back.”

Harry stared at him.

“What?”

Draco covered his eyes with his hands and tipped his head over the arm of the sofa.

“Just Legimens me, Potter, I don’t want to explain.”

“I’m not going to *Legimens* you!”

“I’m *asking* you to!”

“Just talk to me!”

“I can’t—I can’t—you’ll say it wasn’t real—I can’t stand it—”

He was speaking in dashes. He had done it twice before: when Harry ordered him to call Voldemort by his name, and when (Harry’s stomach twisted itself into a knot) he had suggested that Draco loved being ordered around sexually by Steven Hodges.

“Draco, it’s okay,” said Harry, “I’ll do it, whatever you want, okay?” He put his hands on Draco’s ankles. Draco lifted his head back to look at him. “Okay,” said Harry again. “Now?”

Draco nodded.

“*Legimens*,” said Harry.

Draco was shivering in a cell. He looked fragile and freezing. Narcissa Malfoy sat across from him. But it wasn't really Narcissa Malfoy, Harry reminded himself. It was Draco, talking to himself.

"No one will respect you," said Narcissa, or Draco, really. "They will pity you, if you're lucky. But pity can easily be translated into love, and eventually that will lead to respect. You have to make them love you."

"Who?"

"Everyone!"

Draco's eyes were dead and hopeless.

"Well, I suppose it will pass the time. Go on then. What's my first lesson?"

Some of the advice Draco gave himself under the guise of Narcissa was sinister, Machiavellian. But a lot of it seemed based on thoughtful observation of others. It emphasised the importance of patience, bravery, and consideration.

Narcissa repeatedly warned Draco that no one would ever love him. Which meant, Harry realised, that Draco told himself that, over and over again.

He saw Narcissa tell Draco to leave Azkaban in any way he could.

"You will go mad if you stay," she said, or Draco told himself. Draco had known, deep down, that he was losing his mind.

Harry watched the trial. He noticed what he had been too drunk to see at the time: the miserable resignation on Draco's face when Harry balked at touching his Mark.

The memories skipped ahead to the first night at Grimmauld Place. He watched Draco sneak out of his bed, looking haunted and pale, to find Narcissa on the landing. He sat down, watching her hungrily for several long moments before speaking.

"Are you real?" he asked her.

“Does it matter?” she answered. Draco laughed softly.

“Fair enough.”

“You have to make him love you,” said Narcissa. Draco put his head on his knees.

“I know, mother.”

“He hates you. You have to change his mind.”

“I’m trying. It’s not... I thought it would be easier,” said Draco, his voice cracking slightly. He glanced at Harry’s door. “Let’s go downstairs,” he said.

Harry followed Draco and Narcissa into the kitchen.

“He’s the last person on earth who could ever forgive me,” said Draco. He leant his forehead against the kitchen cabinet. “This is hopeless.”

“I think he was awake. I doubt he sleeps well.”

“I didn’t know you had been killed. I didn’t remember.”

Narcissa’s eyes softened.

“You can’t mourn, yet,” she said.

Draco’s eyes were bright with tears. One came spilling quickly down his cheek as he nodded.

“I know. Self-pity. Unappealing.”

“You must be brave,” said Narcissa.

“I’m not brave, though.”

“Think of other people instead of yourself,” said Narcissa.

Draco nodded again, although more tears kept rolling down his face, clearly to his frustration. He wiped them impatiently away.

“I’m trying,” he said.

“Check the cabinets for Valerian tea, my sweet. This is a Black household, I’m sure Kreacher will have it in stock.”

“Oh, God,” said Draco, starting to cry in earnest now, but he rifled through the cupboards until he found a tea caddy. He put the kettle on.

“Draco,” said Narcissa, sternly. “Your eyes will be red.”

Draco tilted his head back to look at the ceiling and held his eyes wide open, clearly hoping gravity would pull the tears back into their ducts.

“Potter never even knew his parents,” said Narcissa. “Have some perspective.”

“I’m trying,” said Draco again.

“Do you think anyone ever brought *him* tea when he couldn’t sleep?”

Draco abruptly took the kettle off the hob and put more water in, so that there would be enough for two cups.

“He had been drinking, at your trial,” said Narcissa.

“I know.”

“In the morning, like your father used to—”

“I *know*,” said Draco, more sharply. His tears stopped. His expression had hardened considerably at the mention of his father.

“You forgave your father,” Narcissa reminded him.

Draco turned to the kitchen cupboards, looking for mugs with tight-lipped determination.

“There was nothing to forgive,” he said coldly.

“Drinking in the morning, not sleeping at night,” said Narcissa. “It must be lonely.”

Draco gave her a hard look.

“Yes, all right. Although I’m warning you, he’s going to hex me.”

“And if he does?”

Draco clenched his teeth.

“I won’t make a sound.”

The kettle began to shriek. Draco took it off the hob and poured the boiling water into the mugs. He found a large silver spoon and checked his reflection in the back of it.

“I don’t look as if I’ve been blubbing, do I?”

“No,” said Narcissa. “And remember; do not speak of yourself. That isn’t what matters, now.”

Draco made a small sound, halfway between a laugh and dry sob.

“No. I know.”

He picked up the two mugs, walked up the stairs, and rapped on Harry’s door carefully with one knuckle.

“Yes?” came Harry’s voice from inside. Draco pushed open the door with his hip.

“Tea?”

As the memories skipped forward, Harry remembered the cautious, delicate

way Draco had questioned him about Cedric that night. He hadn't *looked* as if he had just been crying.

"Do you feel remorse?" Narcissa asked Draco, over and over.

"I can't!" said Draco each time, growing increasingly frustrated. Increasingly disheartened when his mother told him no one would ever love him if he didn't.

Narcissa—Draco, Harry reminded himself— talked about Harry, as well. She was unnervingly perceptive in some ways, for instance, when she guessed at Harry's mental state, and completely off mark in others, as when she told Draco how Harry felt about him.

"He's started to ask me about myself," said Draco, looking happier than he had in any of the memories so far.

"You're doing so well, my sweet boy," said Narcissa.

"I don't—it's strange, isn't it? Never to talk about myself?"

"You talk about yourself all the time, Draco."

Draco paced around his bedroom.

"Do I?" he asked, vaguely.

"Draco," said Narcissa. He stopped pacing. "You don't *want* to talk to him, do you?"

Draco's right hand went to his Mark. He looked lost.

"I..."

"My sweet," said Narcissa. "Do you really think he'll like you if he gets to know you better?"

Draco buried his face in his arms.

The memories shifted again.

“He wants to sleep with me,” Draco told his mother. His hair was sticking up; he kept running his hands through it, and his pupils were wide and black.

“Tricky,” said Narcissa.

“Maybe I should just do it,” said Draco. He sounded... hopeful?

Narcissa shook her head.

“No. Once lust is sated, the object of desire becomes loathsome. You are already too loathed to take such a risk.”

Draco did a very bad job of hiding how hurt he was. Narcissa told him to try pretend to be in love with Harry. Draco refused.

The next memory was at Hogwarts. Draco burst into his bedroom, looking wild with excitement.

“He wants to be friends,” he said.

“He likes how you make him feel,” said Narcissa. “It doesn’t mean he likes *you*.”

“No, I... I know that,” said Draco, crestfallen.

“He can’t love you until you feel remorse,” said Narcissa.

“But I can’t feel remorse just so that he’ll love me,” said Draco.

“Therein lies the problem,” said Narcissa.

Harry watched as Narcissa grew crueller, less sympathetic. “You’ve run out of help,” she told Draco. The more people attacked Draco, the more he lacerated himself through the memory of his mother, whose face began to morph in subtle ways.

Harry thought of what Draco had said about Steven: *“I wonder how he’ll turn out. It’ll go one way or the other. Bitterness, or redemption.”* Bitterness, or redemption. Draco could not have decided to become a better person for selfless reasons: not when he crouched alone in Azkaban, orphaned, despised and imprisoned. Had he tried, he would likely have awoken the bitterness. So instead, he had found a self-serving reason to push himself towards redemption. He was Slytherin through and through (Harry remembered how the hat had called out Draco’s house almost the instant it touched his head), and so his goodness was different from Harry’s. But the issue of whether it counted as true goodness struck Harry as more or less linguistic: some might call it calculating, but it could just as easily be termed purposeful.

Draco had told himself he was becoming a better person to trick other people, but the trick wasn’t really on them. It was on Draco himself, who had striven tirelessly to be selfless and brave, without realising how transformative his efforts would prove.

Harry watched as Narcissa’s face began to rot, as she grew terrifying, as she told Draco to hide his flaws from Harry. He watched as Draco stood up to her—to himself—and did the right thing, even though it frightened him. Even though Draco clearly thought self-revelation would result in him losing everything, everyone.

Harry knew how to be brave in the face of death. But it wasn’t death that Draco had faced. It was something far more insidious and creeping. In Azkaban, Draco had stared down a life of loneliness, desolation and shame, stretching endlessly ahead, and had steeled himself just as surely as Harry had when he walked into the Forbidden Forest to be killed. It wasn’t Gryffindor bravery, but it was bravery nonetheless, and Harry fell deeper in love with him with each memory he witnessed.

And then the memories ended. Harry lowered his wand and opened his eyes. Draco had moved to sit on the arm of the sofa, his feet buried in the cushions. He held his head in his hands.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Draco,” began Harry, but Draco interrupted him.

“I know what it looks like, but I haven’t been *pretending*—maybe at first, a bit? But I genuinely felt sorry for you, and I was grateful, so I wasn’t—I mean obviously it was self-serving, but that doesn’t mean that my feelings for you aren’t—I know you won’t be able to trust me now, but you have to believe me—”

“Draco,” said Harry, and he pulled Draco’s hands away from his face. “I love you.”

Draco frowned.

“You do?”

Harry laughed and nodded.

“Yep,” he said.

“But I tricked you.”

“I’m really not too fussed about *why* you told yourself you were becoming a better person. I just admire you for making the change.”

Draco leant away from Harry, looking deeply confused.

“Did you—did you see the memories?”

“Yes.”

“Harry…”

“But there was one thing I was wondering about,” said Harry. “See, I’m madly, head over heels in love with you, and I know you quite fancy me, but are you up for being my boyfriend? Or would you rather keep things casual? Because I don’t want to pressure you—”

“Boyfriend?” repeated Draco.

“Yeah.”

“Yours?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not drunk?” asked Draco uncertainly. Harry shook his head. Draco’s right hand went to his left forearm. Harry lifted it, rolled up Draco’s sleeve, and put his hand on the Mark.

“Every single thing I’ve learnt about you today has made me respect you more,” he said.

Draco’s eyes were fixed on Harry’s hand on his arm. He licked his lips.

“You’re serious,” he said.

“If you don’t want us to do anything, I’ll back off, no hard feelings,” said Harry, trying to sound sincere.

“No,” said Draco quickly.

“No, don’t back off? Or no, you don’t want to be my boyfriend?”

“Don’t back off,” said Draco in a low voice. Harry got to his knees and shuffled forward until he was in between Draco’s legs.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll stay right here.”

He put one hand on the back of Draco’s neck and pulled him into a kiss. Draco deepened it, his hands roaming all over Harry. He slipped off the arm, into the sofa cushions, so that Harry loomed over him.

“This is a good place for you,” said Harry.

“Hard for me to get up to any mischief if I’m beneath you,” said Draco.

“Wish we’d discovered this in sixth year.”

Draco laughed and kissed him again.

Harry lost track of how long they had been kissing when Draco next spoke.

“You know I won’t believe any of this for a while,” he said.

Harry nuzzled his jaw.

“That’s fine. I’ll say it often, if it helps. I love you.”

“Maybe you only like me when I’m unhappy. I was happy at Hogwarts, until sixth year, anyway, and you never liked me then.”

“You’re happy with Ginny. You were happy skating, today. I’m pretty sure seeing you happy is my favourite thing in the world.”

Draco looked as if he wanted to say something more, but he didn’t. He arched up to meet Harry’s lips, instead.

21. Chapter 21

They lay in Harry's bed, exhausted and sated, and Harry noticed suddenly that he didn't feel angry at all. The burgeoning rage and bitterness he had carried in his chest since the Battle of Hogwarts seemed to have dissolved. He turned to smile at Draco, who was watching him warily. Harry remembered what Narcissa had told Draco, in the memories.

"I still love you," he said.

Draco's expression relaxed a fraction. Harry stretched and pulled Draco's head onto his chest.

"It's pretty great that we'll have privacy, even at Hogwarts," he said.

Draco murmured in quiet agreement.

"Although obviously we can't tell anyone," said Harry, and kicked himself as Draco stiffened in his arms. "Not because I'm ashamed of you! Because I don't want the Ministry saying I'm too involved to keep an eye on you."

"Oh," said Draco.

"Sorry," said Harry. "I shouldn't have phrased it like that."

"I'm not some delicate flower, Potter."

"No, I know."

"I'm telling Ginny, whether you say I can or not."

Harry laughed.

"And I'm telling Ron and Hermione and the Weasleys."

"Not much of a secret, then," said Draco.

“Well, I don’t really want to keep you a secret,” said Harry.

Draco chuckled softly.

“Maybe *I’m* ashamed of *you*.”

Harry sat up.

“Are you?”

Draco’s eyes widened.

“No? Harry, are you insecure?”

“Everyone’s insecure. You told me that.”

Draco reached out and brushed his thumb against Harry’s scar.

“Don’t be. Not about me. You haven’t got anything to worry about, when it comes to me.”

“You haven’t said it back,” said Harry, uncomfortably. “I’ve told you I love you, and you haven’t said it back.”

Draco blushed and looked away.

“Self-preservation,” he said.

“But you do love me,” said Harry.

Draco watched him with his steady grey eyes for a moment before answering. Harry recognised that look. He was calculating.

“You don’t have anything to feel insecure about,” he said, eventually.

“Okay,” said Harry, although he wasn’t happy about it.

On Christmas morning, they exchanged gifts in Harry's bed. Draco had slept there every night since the day they went ice skating. Draco still couldn't quite believe any of this, but he did not question it too much. He tried to enjoy the temporary miracle of Harry Potter thinking he was in love with him, while it lasted.

Draco had never been good at gifts. He gave Harry the first novel of Griselda Crowley's series about aurors investigating a rogue lust potion being sold on the black market.

Harry gave him a Firebolt. Draco unwrapped it with trembling hands and stared the sleek handle, the gold lettering on the polished wood.

"It's not just from me. It's from Hermione, as well," said Harry.

"But... I can't fly anymore," said Draco. To his surprise, Harry grinned.

"You can, on this. Hermione's been working on it. It's fitted with an in-built hammock spell. If you fall off, you'll just slip into a cushion of air. We ran it by St Mungo's and they said it was fine. Firebolt have actually bought the patent off Hermione; they're going to start putting it on all their brooms."

Draco had a lump in his throat. He swallowed it and glared at the broom, trying not to cry.

"Do you like it?" asked Harry.

Draco nodded.

"Are you okay?" asked Harry.

Draco started to nod, then stopped himself.

"My father gave me my last broomstick," he said.

“Oh,” said Harry.

“He, um, he really loved me,” said Draco. “I mean, I... I haven’t even *begun* to think about how I feel about him, now. I avoid thinking about him, because... well, you saw how complicated it was with my mother, and she didn’t even...” he didn’t finish the sentence. *Sell out our family to the forces of evil*, he finished in his head, but then his thoughts hit a wall. He couldn’t think about that yet. It would be a long, long time before he was whole enough to consider his father with any distance.

“I really love you, too,” said Harry.

Each time Harry said that, something deep in Draco’s chest seemed to loosen. He was scared of that loosening, scared of how he would hold himself together when all the knots that tangled him were gone.

“We should get dressed if we’re going to the Burrow,” he said.

He was very nervous about going to the Burrow, but Ginny jumped into his arms the moment he arrived, wrapping her legs around his waist and crying “Draco!” in what was clearly a purposefully ostentatious show of affection. It seemed to work. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were cordial, reminding him of how Ron had been in the hospital. Although Ron was much more friendly than before. He admired Draco’s new broomstick for ages, and they talked about aerodynamics and the broomstick regulations in the Quidditch league, and Ron didn’t insult him once.

“Draco is a quidditch nerd,” said Harry, coming to sit next to Draco and... and... kissing Draco on the lips.

Draco’s face was burning hot, but Ron didn’t mention it.

“Yeah, I gathered,” he said. “Have you ever thought about working in the flight industry?”

It had been years since Draco had thought about anything but survival.

“I don’t really know what I want to do,” he said. “I’m not sure how, er, hireable I am.”

“Hermione says your grades are amazing,” said Ron.

Draco raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, of course, I was talking about my grades. I’ve hitherto been reviled by the Wizarding World because I got an Acceptable in History of Magic.”

Ron laughed.

“Yeah, all right, all right.”

“The best university for flight studies is in Italy,” said Harry casually. “In Venice. They do quidditch training, broom-making, legalities of the flying industry, everything. It’s a four year course.”

“Venice?”

“Mhm,” said Harry. “They barely know who Vold— who Tom Riddle is, in Italy. And by the time we came back, things here would have settled a bit.”

“By the time we came back?” asked Draco. Harry shrugged.

“It’s just a thought.”

Another painful knot in Draco’s chest gave way.

“Venice,” he said again.

“Harry, dear, could you come help?” called Mrs. Weasley from the kitchen. Harry kissed Draco on the mouth again before going to see what was needed.

Venice, thought Draco. With Harry. To learn everything there was to know about flying and quidditch.

Ron handed him back the Firebolt.

“He’s not usually like that, with the people he dates,” he said.

Draco looked up sharply.

“Like what?”

“Happy.”

Draco didn’t know how to respond to that.

In the Easter holidays, Draco’s sentence was officially ended and his assets returned to him. The first thing he did was go to Diagon Alley with Ginny. Harry didn’t even ask to go with them. The more time Draco spent with Ginny and Luna, the steadier he became; the less prone to unpredictable bouts of silent gloom.

He returned to Grimmauld Place looking like some sort of Wizarding prince. He wore a sumptuous grey robe, embroidered at the sleeves and throat with delicate silver thread. The robe was cut to emphasise his slim, muscular body.

Harry hadn’t realised until now what a difference it made, to see Draco dressed in the splendour he had always worn at school. It made him handsomer, of course, but that was only part of it. He looked calmer. Harry realised that Draco must have been frightened the Ministry would keep his family’s fortune, that he would no longer be rich, and that *rich* had been a key part of his identity. With his money back, Draco looked... lighter.

“You look,” started Harry, but then stopped himself, because he couldn’t describe how Draco looked in front of Ginny. It was decidedly too sexual.

“Fuckable?” said Ginny.

“Er,” said Harry.

“I know,” said Ginny. “You should have *seen* how people stared at him on Diagon Alley.”

“They were staring because I’m a Death Eater,” said Draco, looking embarrassed.

“No,” said Harry and Ginny at the same time.

“It was definitely the fuckable thing,” said Harry.

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“How long are you guys going to wait before you tell everyone you’re dating?” asked Ginny. “Because, word of advice, Harry—I’d stake your claim soon, before everyone figures out how gorgeous he is.”

“Ginny,” said Draco.

Harry sighed.

“I’m excited to be able to kiss you in public,” he told Draco. “But I am not looking forward to the headlines.”

Draco ran his hand through Harry’s hair. It still thrilled Harry whenever he did that. It felt proprietary.

“I can sort all that out, if you like,” said Draco. “We’ll just need to give an exclusive interview to the right reporter, so that we can spin it the way you want. Otherwise the press will have control of the story, and it will be... sordid.”

Harry looked at Ginny.

“It’s sexy when he goes all Slytherin, isn’t it?”

“Very,” said Ginny.

But in fact, Draco turned out to be quite right. He tracked down a fairly

neutral reporter at *The Prophet* named Rachel Farley, and had Harry write requesting an exclusive interview. He insisted that Harry wear Gryffindor robes for the picture “to reassure the reader that I haven’t changed you”. Draco wore his princely grey robes. "Politically neutral," he said. "Red would be trying too hard."

“There was a rather nasty article about you two before Christmas,” said Rachel, as they sat down in Harry’s sitting room, which Draco and Kreacher had practically redecorated.

“I unfortunately fell victim to blackmail, and was obliged to give that interview. It was a trying period for Harry and he’d rather not dwell on it,” said Draco smoothly.

“Although I did fancy him,” said Harry. Draco rolled his eyes.

“You did?” said Rachel.

“Yeah. But I waited to ask him out until his sentence was complete,” said Harry, sticking to Draco’s story.

“You contacted me very quickly,” said Rachel.

“Harry was concerned about the press finding out and the public feeling betrayed,” said Draco. “Of course, he understands that many people will have a hard time stomaching the idea of us together.”

“And I’m really bloody serious about him,” said Harry. Draco closed his mouth and looked at him, puzzled. This was not part of what they had agreed to say.

“Really?” asked Rachel. “How serious?”

“Very,” said Harry. Draco blushed. “I love him.”

Rachel surveyed them.

“Draco, I’m sure you can see that for many of our readers, Harry’s statement will be difficult to believe.”

“They’re going to think I’ve drugged you with a love potion, Harry,” said Draco gently, and Harry felt like an idiot, because of course Draco was right, and he should have listened.

“You haven’t, though.” He turned to Rachel. “I’m happy to be tested for traces of love potion.”

“People on love potions don’t tend to retain much of their original personalities,” said Rachel. “I’m pretty sure we can discount that theory.”

The interview lasted an hour, and Harry felt thoroughly uncomfortable for every minute of it. Particularly when Rachel got to asking them about the war. Draco’s hands started trembling worse than ever, and Harry held them as Draco talked about how he did not ask, or expect, anyone to forgive him for his actions, and that it was a mark of Harry’s heroic generosity that he had been able to. Harry tried to argue with him on this, but Draco silently shook his head at him, and he stopped.

The article came out the very next day. They had posed for formal pictures before the interview, but the one they chose for the front page was a candid. Draco was speaking. He looked guilty, fragile and beautiful. Harry was holding both of Draco’s hands in his own, and was staring at Draco as if he was the only thing on earth that mattered. Their legs were tilted towards each other, and they looked as if they *fit* together.

Which, of course, they did.

One Year Later

They were at a small cafe by the canal outside their flat in Cannaregio, Venice, when Draco finally said it.

Harry had known it was coming. They had been dating for nearly a year and a half, after all. They both knew Draco loved him, even though he’d never said so.

But lately, Harry had noticed a change in Draco. Perhaps it was living in a country where no one despised him. Perhaps it was simply the accumulation of months together, of the hundreds, or maybe thousands, of times Harry had told Draco he loved him. Perhaps it was the fact that Ginny came to visit every other weekend, and showed no signs of growing tired of Draco. Whatever it was, Harry could sense something loosening in Draco, something shedding. Draco was happy. Even when his injuries hurt him, he did not retreat into himself. From time to time, he mentioned his mother, and even, on occasion, his father. Neither he nor Harry talked about the war much anymore, not because they were hiding from it, but because it no longer plagued them.

The waiter brought them two Aperol Spritzes. The drinks came with a small bowl of crisps. Draco extracted the paper napkin out from under them and got out a pen.

“I still don’t understand why we have to learn how to do new moves in *theory* before we do them in practice,” said Harry. “That’s some Dolores Umbridge bullshit, you know?”

“It’s important to understand the theory before you try something dangerous,” said Draco, not looking up. He had finished scribbling, but kept his hand cupped over the paper napkin, staring at words he had written.

“You sound like Hermione,” sighed Harry.

“High praise,” said Draco, flicking the napkin casually over to Harry.

I love you, it said.

Harry felt as if his heart might burst.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Draco. “You know how I admire Hermione’s intellect.”

“How long?” asked Harry breathlessly.

Draco met his gaze, his grey eyes steady.

“Since the day we kissed at the pub in Hogsmeade.”

“That was bloody ages ago!!”

“Yes,” said Draco.

“I thought— sometimes I thought you just didn’t—”

“I couldn’t be sure that you...” said Draco, haltingly. “I didn’t believe you could really...”

“What changed?”

Draco looked around him. The soft spring sunlight reflected off the canal. Italian teenagers drank wine on the steps of a nearby bridge.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I still can’t quite believe it. It doesn’t seem fair that I get to have this, when good people died. But, for whatever reason, it’s what I’m getting. So... I love you.”

“I love you too,” said Harry. “And I think you deserve this.”

“You’re biased.”

“Am I?”

Draco nodded, looking rather unhappy.

“Maybe you’re right,” said Harry. “But maybe that’s the point of family, right? Having someone who’s biased towards you? Who thinks you deserve to have everything?”

Draco looked down at his hands.

“That’s what my parents thought.”

“I bet mine did, too.”

“Did you just call yourself my family?” asked Draco. “A bit incestuous, no?”

“Married people are families,” said Harry. Draco froze. “I’m not proposing!”

“Good,” said Draco. “I know that was all the rage in our parents’ generation, but I think we’re a bit young.”

“Me too,” said Harry. He took a sip of his spritz. Draco smiled at him. He was so fucking gorgeous. “But one day I will propose, you know.”

“Not if I get there first,” said Draco. Harry laughed.

“It’s not a competition, Draco.”

“Oh, it absolutely is,” said Draco. “And trust me, Harry: I’m going to win.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I review books on instagram at [@let_them_eat_books](#) if you're interested in that! Thank you for reading, everyone! Your comments were so lovely and encouraging.

Author's Note:

Ten points to anyone who gets which famous moment in British reality tv history I'm referencing with the title...